# NEGOTIATING THE BROWS: VALUE, IDENTITY, AND THE FORMATION OF MIDDLEBROW CULTURE

by

RACHEL TANNER

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2020

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Rachel Tanner

Title: Negotiating the Brows: Value, Identity, and the Formation of Middlebrow Culture

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by

| | |
|---|---|
| Mark Whalan | Chair |
| Paul Peppis | Core Member |
| John Gage | Core Member |
| Helen Southworth | Institutional Representative |

and

| | |
|---|---|
| Kate Mondloch | Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School |

Original approval and signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded June 2020.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Rachel Tanner

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

June 2020

Title: Negotiating the Brows: Value, Identity, and the Formation of Middlebrow Culture

The middlebrow has always caused problems. When the term entered the popular lexicon during the 1920s and '30s, critics often used it as an epithet to lampoon middle-class readers who were more interested in accumulating social status than appreciating aesthetic value. The guardians of elite culture—whether genteel or avant-garde—considered this dilettantist subset of the middle class a threat to their cultural authority and adopted the newly-coined term to create distinctions between second-rate taste and their own. As a result, the middlebrow often found itself reduced to a synonym for standardized, mediocre middle-class taste.

The essays in this dissertation project, by contrast, posit the middlebrow as an affirmative category. The project weaves together critical voices, primarily found in magazines of the first half of the twentieth century, that variously created, theorized, debated, and attempted to contain cultural "middleness." The result is a century-long conversation about what the middlebrow looks like and who gets to decide, throughout which anxieties over class and authority are always close at hand. Each essay in this project addresses the logical and rhetorical structures at play in configuring middlebrow culture, both by critics who identify with the category and those who identify against it. And each essay demonstrates how those structures have the power to shift the framing of

cultural value. The ways in which critics describe or deploy "middleness," therefore, shapes the debate about which creative works, genres, or forms—and, by extension, their audiences—are really truly legitimate. The essays also each wrestle with contemporary critics' tendency to link middlebrow culture to the middle class, limiting its affirmative potential by grounding their analyses in theories that reinforce, rather than upset, hierarchical configurations of culture. Ultimately, this project argues throughout for an understanding of middlebrow as a rhetorical position in debates about cultural value, one capable of embracing multiple value perspectives at once and negotiating the various ways that values get assigned to forms of cultural production and consumption.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Rachel Tanner

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon Graduate School, Eugene, OR
New York University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, New York, NY
New York University Leonard N. Stern School of Business, New York, NY

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, English, 2020, University of Oregon
Master of Arts, English and American Literature, 2011, New York University
Bachelor of Science, Management and Organizational Behavior, 2006, New York University Stern School of Business

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Transatlantic modernist literature
Modern rhetorical theory
American cultural studies
Periodical studies
Middlebrow studies

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Director of Research Advisory Services, EAB Global, Washington, DC, 2017 to present

Program Analyst, US Government Accountability Office, Washington, DC, 2017

Assistant Director of Composition, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 2015 – 2017

Student Services Director, Kaplan International Colleges, New York, NY, 2008 - 2011

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Research Support Fellowship, Oregon Humanities Center, 2016-17,

Excellence in Teaching Award, University of Oregon Composition Program, Spring 2015

College of Arts and Sciences Graduate Scholarship, University of Oregon, 2014-15

Kirby Prize for Best Graduate Seminar Paper in English, University of Oregon Department of English, Spring 2014

Excellence in Teaching Award, University of Oregon Composition Program, Spring 2013

Hermine Zwanck-Graham Fellowship, University of Oregon Department of English, 2011-12

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Mark Whalan, for always giving me credit for saying the smart thing I didn't quite actually say; and to Elizabeth Bruno, ever my lighthouse.

This research was supported in part by a research fellowship from the Oregon Humanities Center.

To my sister Kathryn, who made me promise to dedicate this to her in exchange for paying for my groceries and bar tab that very, very austere summer after my first year.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

## MAKING MEANING IN THE MIDDLE: UNDERSTANDING THE AFFIRMATIVE "MIDDLEBROW"

In February 2011, *New Yorker* book blogger Macy Halford posted an article pondering why Zadie Smith, recently hired to the *Harper's* book beat, would insist that people refer to her as a "reviewer" rather than a "critic." Halford finds the distinction important for the status of book reviews in the internet age: she writes that Smith's choice of label shows sensitivity to her tenuous authority amidst the incalculable mass of amateur online reviewers. "Viewed in this light," Halford concludes, "Smith's project becomes even more relevant. To my mind, she is working in a grand middlebrow tradition—she writes 'reviews,' not 'criticism,' because one is accessible while the other is not, without, however, being dumber or sacrificing the personality allowed the critic" ("Reviewers on Reviewing"). The internet proceeded to gasp at Halford's use of the word "middlebrow" to describe the critically-dear Zadie Smith—a gasp loud enough that Halford devoted her next day's post to clarifying that she didn't mean the word as an insult: "My fault: it's a fraught term. I actually was using 'middlebrow' in a positive sense" ("On Middlebrow"). Despite the clear admiration with which Halford treats Smith in her original article, the word "middlebrow" is so fraught that it requires an explicit clarification: "middlebrow" doesn't always have to be a slur.

In her follow-up article, Halford elaborates why "middlebrow" means something positive for her. She explains that it denotes a mediating force, often available in the form of magazines, that allowed her access to cultural richness, even as an average public-

school kid in Texas. “Both *Harper’s* and *The New Yorker* have often been viewed as middlebrow,” Halford explains, “both magazines are devoted to the high but also to making it accessible to many; to bringing ideas that might remain trapped in ivory towers and academic books, or in high-art (or film or theatre) scenes, into the pages of a relatively inexpensive periodical that can be bought at bookstores and newsstands across the country” (“On Middlebrow”). In the first part of this sentence, Halford speaks in the passive voice that often accompanies the middlebrow moniker, as if it were a declaration delivered from the cultural gods on high. But in the second half of the sentence, Halford refers to a kind of re-considered middlebrow-ness that has less to do with subjective declarations of taste than with availability and mediation. Halford uses the term middlebrow to refer to cultural offerings available, both materially and intellectually, to a broader audience, though not necessarily created to pander to the masses. It’s a category that calls for a cease-fire in the tired old conflicts between auratic culture and reproduced culture.

As she concludes her second article, though, Halford pivots again on the meaning of the middlebrow, asserting that the internet is forcing us to rethink (again) the meaning of the word: “in an era when the highest is as accessible as the lowest—accessible in the sense that both are only a click away…we actually have to think anew about how to walk the middle line.” In the internet age, scarcity has virtually no weight in the equation that decides the importance of a cultural production. Walking the so-called middle line, now, means negotiating all the other cultural dialectics that were eclipsed by the problem of availability: the autonomous versus the commercial, the authentic versus the mediated, character versus personality, utility versus frivolity, engagement versus entertainment.

Like the pin in the center of an elaborate pinwheel, the middlebrow, reconsidered, provides a stable center from which to view the ever-spinning intricacies of cultural formation.

Halford was not the only one in 2011 to call for a reconsideration of the middlebrow as a category. In October of that year, the *New York Review of Books* reissued a collection of essays by the mid-century cultural critic Dwight Macdonald. Macdonald's *Masscult and Midcult*, originally published in 1960, endures as one of the most venomous take-downs of the culture of middleness, by any name. *New Yorker* writer and Harvard professor Louis Menand contributes an affectionate but skeptical introduction to the volume that tempers Macdonald's critique by situating it within Macdonald's desire to square his Marxist politics with his taste for avant-garde art. Menand points out that Macdonald's mixture of taste and politics takes a step beyond cultural evaluation for criticism's sake, putting the fate of the republic itself at stake in the rise of mass culture. Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, according to Menand, the shifting cultural tides have rendered Macdonald's alarmism passé: "There has been a levelling of taste in both directions, down and up—a kind of Unibrowism. People…don't have a problem with the idea that a television series might be as dramatically involving as a grand opera. It's not that they think that these cultural forms are equally worthy as art, but they respond with less inhibition to the pop and less intimidation to the avant-garde" ("Browbeaten"). Although Menand clearly respects Macdonald's intellectualism and charisma, he views Macdonald's disparagement of the middlebrow as a specific brand of mid-century pessimism, no longer relevant.

Beyond the arguably intellectualist pages of *The New Yorker*, where Menand's introduction to the MacDonald book appeared in full, the middlebrow also turns up in the popular press in the summer of 2011, after a trend piece in *GQ* proclaims it a new mark of impetuous cool. "You know who likes the middlebrow?" goads the author, Devin Friedman, "The unacceptable. Boring people. The easily manipulated. But fuck it. I was in Le Pain Quotidien the other day (middlebrowest chain in New York!), and some Feist came on, and my mood brightened a little bit" ("Middlebrow: The Taste that Dare Not Speak Its Name"). Considering Friedman's exclamations still yet "rather snooty," a *Daily Mail* article the next month attempts to rally its troops under a middlebrow banner free of Friedman's trendy ironic tone, bringing in an authority—a "psychotherapist and novelist"—to argue that love of mass culture is just human instinct. "So, Gap-wearing, Starbucks-supping fans of the middlebrow, now is your time to stand up, in your millions, and be counted" (Coleman "Middlebrow and Proud"). Despite the differences in how each of these journalists sum up middlebrow culture—differences that clearly correlate to each publication's positioning of its audience—both argue for making middlebrow a badge of pride, a way for their readers to feel a part of cultural community.

To round out this year of the middlebrow's reclamation, 2011 also counted a number of scholarly interventions in middlebrow studies. In March, Nick Hubble edited a special issue of the Literary London society's journal, devoted to "Middlebrow London." That spring, *Modernist Cultures* also published a special middlebrow issue, edited by Sophie Blanch and Melissa Sullivan. In their introduction, Blanch and Sullivan express their hope that the special issue might provide a space for reconsidering the methodological and disciplinary biases that tend to marginalize middlebrow culture in

academic study: “In this issue…we seek out new ways of approaching the middlebrow’s strategic, experimental and entertaining cultural variability…Research into the middlebrow encourages, or perhaps even demands, a more interdisciplinary consideration of its nature, practices and reception” (Sullivan and Blanch 4). In June, in conjunction with the Middlebrow Network, the Space Between Society continued the work of those two special issues by theming their conference “The Battle of the Brows: Cultural Distinction in the Space Between, 1914-1945.” In its call for papers, the conference asks participants to consider, again, questions of how certain scholarly approaches “impact the vocabularies and values through which we access and understand the societies and cultures of this time period” (Space Between Society). Whether academic or popular, or somewhere in between, the chorus of voices singing the word “middlebrow” in 2011 reach a point of unison on one point: we need to start thinking about the middlebrow as an affirmative category, a label to feel proud about, whether we’re thinking about it in the context of scholarship or just hanging out at the Au Bon Pain.

That necessity is at the heart of this project, which hopes to continue in the spirit of those popular and academic calls for a new configuration of middlebrow culture. My aim with this project is to expose certain modes of argument that continue, despite best intentions, to perpetuate derogatory stereotypes of middlebrow culture. Pitfalls always surround conversations about the middlebrow, and it’s easy to fall into them—to pigeonhole the middlebrow by pinning it to a mere catalog of cultural artifacts, or by squeezing it into a rigid social hierarchy, or by judging it, as A. O. Scott recently joked, as “a semantic shoe that belongs on someone else’s foot” (“Squeeze on the Middlebrow”). It’s my intention with this project to avoid those pitfalls by listening to the

voices of critics and writers who identified themselves as middlebrows during the interwar era, the period when the term first gained currency in North America and the U.K. I argue that scholars should start to see the middlebrow as a rhetorical perspective, a mode of entering the debates over cultural value that raged as the first decades of the twentieth century witnessed immense changes to the social landscape. Rather than posit dogmatic standards of aesthetic or social value, middlebrow culture encourages and rewards practices of reading (or viewing or listening, et cetera) that simultaneously negotiate the range of possible value positions. Only when we recognize middlebrow as a perspective capable of understanding both commercial value and aesthetic value, for example, or of assuming both conservative and avant-garde attitudes toward art, can we affirmatively conceptualize middlebrow culture, in a way that honors the diverse attitudes and interests of middlebrow consumers themselves.

**A semantic shoe for someone else's foot**

The first matter of business in our search for an affirmative middlebrow is to clarify the cultural politics embedded in the accepted etymology of the term itself, which has only been a part of the English language for a little over a century. The most-rehearsed etymology of "middlebrow" tends to place the word's semantic shoe, in Scott's words, on the foot of some sophisticated cultural consumer. Whether they aim to "recover" the term or not, the majority of critical accounts of the middlebrow tell the same origin story: the word first gains currency during the interwar era, primarily in the U.K., as a subtly derogatory term that masked the anxieties of the intellectual elite. The *OED* definition of middlebrow reinforces this pejorative register: "A person who is only

moderately intellectual or who has average or limited cultural interests (sometimes with the implication of pretensions to more than this)" ("Middlebrow, A.n.). This definition hints at the subtle way that "middlebrow," deployed as in insult, disguises itself as a neutral and objective measure of taste.

As an insult, "middlebrow" hints that culture can be organized into clean categories of legitimacy, the "seductive promise," Beth Driscoll calls it, "that a hidden structure organizes culture" and that he who can deploy the term has got that structure figured out (1). This promise pops up in what many critics, and the *OED*, claim was the first substantive appearance of "middlebrow" in print, in 1925, in the weekly "Charivaria" column of *Punch* magazine—a regular round-up of humorous news-related miscellany. This *Punch* example demonstrates the term's potential as a slur shrouded lightly in cultural observation: "The B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the 'middlebrow.' It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like" (qtd D'Hoker 259). The *Punch* writers' blithe use of the phrase "discovered a new type" evokes the BBC's pop-anthropological role as a taste-maker, searching the wilderness to find specimens of mass culture to legitimize, while also hinting that the BBC's discovery is ironically self-descriptive. As Mary Grover puts it, "the sneer is comprehensive: at the gullible middling sorts who demonstrate their pitiable lack of cultural confidence in looking to the BBC to guide their vain attempts at self-education; at the BBC for taking the cultural aspirations of such consumers seriously" (*Ordeal of Warwick Deeping* 36). As a sneer wrapped in an aura of cultural anthropology, the word "middlebrow" proves itself to be a single stone capable of killing any birds *Punch* deems inferior.

The word thus develops into a failsafe insult for middleness, one measured in deliciously flexible abstractions of taste and usually directed toward middle-class consumers. Joan Shelley Rubin singles out Margaret Widdemer as another writer anxious to identify a sub-intellectual class of readers. In a 1933 essay for the *Saturday Review* titled "Message and Middlebrow," Widdemer uses the term middlebrow to refer to the mass of the reading public who are neither the "tabloid addict class" nor the "tiny group of intellectuals" (Widdemer 433). The key figure of this reading public is the "clubwoman," a matronly figure "beaming above the massed orchids on her violet velvet bosom" who approaches lecturing writers to ask them about their "Message" (433). This clubwoman appears to be single-mindedly interested in the morality of the novels she reads, but Widdemer finds this preoccupation with a book's Message to be little more than an excuse to read stories dripping with sentimentality, containing heroines who "were broken body and soul in a way that would have taught Lucy Ashton and Clarissa Harlowe tricks" (434). Widdemer takes a disdainful interest in middlebrow readers not only for their hypocritical moralizing, but also for their purchasing power: middlebrow readers "support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares" and therefore get the cheap-thrill brand of writing they demand (433). Widdemer views the middlebrow as an alarming and unstoppable economic force that will use its expendable income and leisure time to pull the literary marketplace toward current moral values, commanding constant production of novels that attempt extravagantly to discover "The Meaning of Life" (433). By the mid-1930s, for Widdemer and many other writers, middlebrow and middle class were interchangeable terms: one always necessarily meant the other.

The apex of an etymology of the middlebrow as a slur occurs in 1932, in an argument between Virginia Woolf and J. B. Priestley that resulted in Woolf's infamously scathing commentary on middlebrow culture. The spat was an escalation of tensions that had been mounting since at least 1928, when Arnold Bennett reviewed *Orlando* as a "high-brow lark" (qtd in Cuddy-Keane 19). Melba Cuddy-Keane recounts that Bennett digs his hole deeper in Woolf's regard when, reviewing *A Room of One's Own* the next year, he condescendingly dubs Woolf "the queen of the highbrows" (Cuddy-Keane 19). Four years later, Priestley revives this epithet a third time in a review for the *Evening Standard.* The article—which reviews Woolf's *The Second Common Reader,* as well as books by Woolf's close friends Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, and Winifred Holtby's critical biography of Woolf—generally praises Woolf's career. Priestley's pitfall, however, is calling Woolf "the High Priestess of Bloomsbury," and imagining her presiding over "terrifically sensitive, cultured, invalidish ladies of private means" (qtd in Baxendale 73). Priestley's light-hearted cultural derision caught the attention of the BBC, who invited Priestley to bring the Battle of the Brows to the air waves. He delivers a radio essay on October 13, 1932, entitled "To a Highbrow," during which he continues to make thinly-veiled jabs at Woolf and her ilk, caricaturing their "ludicrously affected manner" and instinctive recoil from anything that might be considered popular. A week later, Harold Nicolson mounts the airwaves to rebut, in an essay called "To a Lowbrow."[1] After *The New Statesman* runs a review of both essays, Woolf decides finally to

[1] No transcript survived for either Priestley's or Nicolson's radio essays. Priestly refashioned his comments into an article for *John O'London's* magazine, but we're only left to imagine Nicholson's argument. Both Melba Cuddy-Keane and John Baxendale have dug through Woolf's and Priestley's letters to develop (opposingly-favored) accounts of the skirmish. See Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (2003), and Baxendale, *Priestley's England: J.B. Priestley and English Culture* (2007).

intervene. She pens a letter to the editor that addresses, as Cuddy-Keane puts it, "the growing cultural tension around the position of the intellectual in society—a tension she saw *both* Priestley and Nicholson exacerbating" (16). The name of that tension was the middlebrow.

Woolf never sent the letter, but it was collected posthumously in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, in 1942. The purpose of the essay is to reframe the Battle of the Brows by allying highbrows and lowbrows against the middlebrows, their true enemy. For Woolf, the highbrow—"the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea"—and the lowbrow—"a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of living at a gallop across life"—have lived in respectful balance with one another, until placed at odds by the "malicious gossip" of the middlebrows (180). Woolf viciously defines the middlebrow as someone incapable of highbrow thought—a man or woman "of middlebred intelligence" who seeks "neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" (180)—and then pretends to address the Prime Minister with "utmost humility" and urgency: "What, sir,…will be the fate of the British Empire and of our Dominion Across the Seas if Middlebrows prevail?" (183). Despite its mock mournfulness, Woolf's concern for the future of the British empire is telling, as it reflects her own colonial attitude toward middlebrow culture. Woolf has no need for a veneer of anthropological objectivity: her project is not to observe the middlebrow but to seize full power over its definition and activities, using that power to reduce the middlebrow to a position of permanent otherness. Her diatribe is funny, clever, and cruel, and does as much as it can to make sure that no one, after reading the essay,

would be caught identifying as a middlebrow. Woolf herself concludes her commentary by threatening, "If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat, or half-crushed worm dares to call me 'middlebrow' I will take my pen and stab him, dead. Yours, etc., Virginia Woolf" (186).

Even when traced by well-meaning scholars wishing to "recover" the middlebrow, any etymology that begins with *Punch* and concludes with Woolf's lethally poised pen tends to rehearse Woolf's rhetorical colonialism, giving the power of definition almost wholly to those who identify themselves *against* the middlebrow. A low-grade version of it still persists in the ways critics and scholars talk about middlebrow culture—rhetorical violence enacted slowly by those who have access to the power of publication (and hope to keep it). We scholars contribute to that violence when we rehearse this etymology of "middlebrow," in which its semantic properties are charted by those who find it disdainful, without complicating it.

**A New Origin Story**

But the word "middlebrow" wasn't always an insult for everyone. Particularly in the United States at the dawn of WWI—the period of the middlebrow's origins—there were at least as many writers and critics who wore the distinction with pride. It was once the case that scholars interested in studying middlebrow culture had to recognize the middlebrow's origins as ignominious, even if their intentions were to salvage the term's reputation, because there was little print evidence to refute the 1925 article in *Punch*. The past few years, however, have seen tremendous growth in the digitization of magazine and newspaper archives, so that now all it takes is a little internet sleuthing to find the

word in print a full decade before BBC and *Punch* got their hands on it. In January, 1915, for example, the term pops up in a *Washington Herald* interview with former Metropolitan Opera manager Andreas Dippel, who was staging a North American tour of the operetta *The Lilac Domino*. Dippel had managed to bring the production of the German operetta to New York just before the start of the war, commissioning an English translation of the libretto in the process, and used its three-month run at the 44th Street Theater to inaugurate a program of light opera on Broadway. Dippel announces to the *Herald* that his dream is to produce opera that is entertaining but maintains its intellectual appeal: "I want to produce genuine operas that will appeal to the high-brow, the low-brow and the middle-brow…I shall produce what is practically grand opera, but in a lighter vein" (cit). Dippel goes on to describe what sounds like a very middlebrow affair, walking a line just enough that side of vaudeville to still be considered opera. Regardless of Dippel's aspirations to bring opera to the (paying) masses, the casualness with which he uses the word "middle-brow," assuming that *Herald* readers would naturally understand its relationship to its cousin terms, demonstrates that the middlebrow was not invented in England during the interwar years—it had already been in the American vernacular since before WWI.

It wasn't until after the war, however, that middlebrow was enough of a concern to make it onto the lecture circuit. WWI-era mentions of the middlebrow tend to include it all in one breath with either or both the lowbrow and highbrow, as if the three naturally combine into a holy trinity of cultural classification: a notice for Tom Moore's 1918 movie *Just For Tonight*, for example, announces that it will "appeal to everyone in town: the highbrows, the middle-brows, the classes and the masses" ("Just for Tonight"). By

1922, however, the term was widely used enough to be coopted by Sunday school teacher-cum-lecturer Margaret Slattery.[2] The incredibly prolific Slattery focused her energy before the war primarily on girls' education and, during the war, on ethical responsibilities during wartime; after the war, however, she tries her hand at cultural criticism. No transcripts exist for the five Ford Hall Forum lectures that she gives during the 1920s, so we're left to guess at the content of lectures with titles like "The Power of Prejudice" and "Who Does Your Thinking For You." In November, 1922, however, she presents a lecture called "High Brow, Low Brow, Middle Brow" for which the press release appears in newspapers from Vermont to Seattle. In the notices, Slattery claims credit for the discovery for which *Punch* would credit the BBC three years later: the invention of "a new word combination, 'middle-brows'" ("Be a Middle-brow"). This new (again) category of the middlebrow, for Slattery, prioritizes ethical care over cultural consumption. The most prevalent version of the lecture notice recognizes Slattery for asserting that "the world needs middle-brows rather than unthinking low-brows and intelligent but heartless high-brows…Big problems remain unsolved because they are viewed as intellectual problems when really they are matters of 'heart'—tolerance, charity, decency, brotherhood" ("Be a Middle-brow"). Slattery organizes middlebrow culture around the value of inclusivity and understanding, over detached analysis. The lofty mission with which Slattery charges middlebrows—to solve the "big problems"—becomes even more so in another version of the press notice: "The middlebrows have the

[2] As further evidence that "middlebrow" was already in wide circulation by the time that *Punch* (and the *OED*) discover it, the word makes an appearance even in Oregon before 1925. An edition of the *Oregon Voter*, a weekly political rag, from January 1921 begins with a (truly terrible) poem poking fun at the petty infighting of the state legislature. The poem begins: "Wake, for the moment calls that you should rouse / And view the Senate and the busy House / Where in the full-launched session congregate / Solons of high, and low, and middle-brows." Collins, Dean. "Rubaiyat of the Session," *Oregon Voter*, 24.5 (29 Jan 1921), p. 1.

mission of bringing the individual factions into better harmony and thereby preventing the groupe [sic] misunderstanding which has been so sure a source of trouble" ("Friday Morning"). In sharp contrast to Woolf's critical picture of the middlebrow representative, the malicious go-between playing highbrows and lowbrows against each other, Slattery casts the middlebrow as a mediator, able to translate the desires of disparate cultural groups and foster better understanding.

The ability to mediate between diverse concerns remains integral to the way American newspaper and magazine writers define the middlebrow through the mid-1920s, though it's more often a mediation of taste than the social mediation that Slattery speaks about. In the June 1924 issue of *Popular Radio*, for example, a short round-up of recent broadcasts claims eclecticism to be the primary organizing factor of middlebrow culture. Although the "radio audience is commonly divided into the 'high brows' who like grand opera and symphony concerts and the 'low brows,' who don't," the article argues that the majority of listeners fall into a more agnostic category: "They like something from all classes of music; a little jazz, a little classical music, a little dance music, once in a while an old fashioned song. Too much of any one thing is—too much" ("Are You a Middlebrow?"). Although it's uncertain what exactly prompts this article, it seems a reaction to an on-going conversation about radio programming—buried in this assertion of middlebrow eclecticism is a critique of radio market pigeonholing. The article gives an alternative glimpse at middlebrow listeners who organize themselves into a demographic around the principle that their tastes can't be inscribed by one sphere in a cultural hierarchy.

Even while the Battle of the Brows was beginning to stir up dust in England, American critics used the middlebrow to sketch out alternatives to social categories that no longer felt relevant. In a 1927 article in the weekly opinion magazine, *The Outlook*, editor Lawrence Fraser Abbott explains that middlebrow has come to refer to a certain mode of cultivation particularly suited to American democracy. Abbott finds himself provoked into thinking about the middlebrow by a reader's letter, which presses him on his uncritical reliance on the category of "middle class." Abbott agrees that "we must find some other method of classification [of society] than that of wealth," but observes, with comic flair, that "the division of society into three classes has been a common practice" since the Greeks. If, he muses, we consider the United States a plutocracy, the tripartite social division appears cut and dried. On the other hand, "the man who believes that a democracy is a form of government based primarily on intelligence will have much more difficulty. Intelligence is a variable and elusive thing and has almost infinite gradations" (281). The division of brows seems to Abbott a much more flexible way to structure American society, because it disregards wealth in favor of cultural distinctions and therefore allows for "all sorts of variations and overlappings":

> Byron, for instance, was a low highbrow and Bunyan a high lowbrow. As for myself, I can never hope to be a highbrow and hope never to be a lowbrow; nor do I want to be a Byron or a Bunyan. What I do hope is that, by the careful cultivation of my tastes, manners, and intelligence, I may be able to keep fairly near to the upper crust of the middlebrows." (288)

Abbott proudly positions himself in one of these overlapping regions, though clearly still in middlebrow territory, through his own deliberate choices, rather than by determination

of class or birth. Middlebrow is something that Abbott *wants* to be, a position he aspires to, rather an in-between place where he finds himself stuck.

These examples demonstrate that the term middlebrow was in wide use in the U.S. for at least a decade before the BBC and *Punch* claimed credit for discovering it. They also show that it's possible to develop an alternate etymology of the middlebrow as it was used by those who identified with it, rather than against it. Even if these examples disagree somewhat on what the middlebrow *is*, exactly, they do make clear two things about middlebrow culture. The first is that the word "middlebrow" felt to critics and writers in the 1910s and '20s as if it named something that necessarily filled a gap in American society—so much so that critics continued to take credit for its coinage. The second is that middlebrow culture, in its affirmative configurations, has much more to do with an ability to comprehend multiple cultural discourses than with preferences for specific genres.

**"Negotiating the Brows": A Journey Through the Middlebrow, in Three Essays**

With that revised etymology of middlebrow in place, the essays that follow in this project consider the rhetorical machinery of an affirmative middlebrow culture. The project weaves together critical voices, primarily found in magazines of the first half of the twentieth century, that variously create, theorize, debate, and attempt to contain cultural "middleness."

The first essay of this project, "Mapping Models of Middleness" offers a largely theoretical examination of the logics and methodologies used throughout the past century to arrive at an understanding of middlebrow culture. Theories of the middlebrow, both

contemporary and historical, often center on models of "middleness" that are neither good nor really fully bad—a cultural no-man's land in search of legitimacy. I contrast those theories with newspaper and magazine artifacts that instead organize middleness using a logic of "both/and," mediating the cultural economy by recontextualizing binary standards of value.

The second essay, "Negotiating a Fair Market Value," grounds that theoretical discussion in the parataxis and irony utilized in the original run of *Vanity Fair*, from its launch in 1913 and through its heyday in the mid-1920s. Taking each issue as a complete text to demonstrate its intertextual ambivalence, I argue that *Vanity Fair* deploys these rhetorical forms to implicate its readers in its evaluations of culture, forming and instructing a community of middlebrow readers.

The final essay, "Trading Up from the Middle," proposes another mode of middlebrow fashioning enacted through rhetorical structures that negotiate cultural values: in this case, the *self*-fashioning of two successful magazine editors caught in the middle of the cultural shifts from nineteenth-century character ethics to twentieth-century "personality." George Horace Lorimer and Edward Bok, both writing thinly fictionalized success manuals, arbitrage the shifting cultural values, using parody to develop a textual middleness from which to reflect on—and profit from—the performativity of success.

These essays in their aggregate present a century-long conversation about what the middlebrow looks like and who gets to decide. Throughout the entire project, critical anxieties over class and authority are always close at hand. Each essay in this project addresses the logical and rhetorical structures at play in configuring middlebrow culture, both by critics who identify with the category and those who identify against it. And each

essay demonstrates how those structures have the power to shift the framing of cultural value. The ways critics describe or deploy "middleness," therefore, shapes the debate about which creative works, genres, or forms—and, by extension, their audiences—are really truly legitimate. And contemporary critics are not exempt from these anxieties: this project builds on the wave of recent middlebrow scholarship kicked off when Joan Shelley Rubin submitted the category for serious scholarly attention by publishing *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* in 1993. Each essay in this project, however, wrestles with contemporary critics' tendency to link middlebrow culture to the middle class, limiting its affirmative potential by grounding it in theories that reinforce, rather than upset, hierarchical configurations of culture. Ultimately, I argue throughout this project for an understanding of middlebrow as a rhetorical position in debates about cultural value, one capable of embracing multiple value perspectives at once and negotiating the various ways that values get assigned to forms of cultural production and consumption.

## CHAPTER II

## MAPPING MODELS OF MIDDLENESS: IN SEARCH OF A "BOTH/AND" THEORY OF MIDDLEBROW CULTURE

In 1946, Henry Holt & Company published a collection of the syndicated comic strip *Krazy Kat*, including in its bright orange binding an introduction penned fondly by e.e. cummings. Holt's trade list that year included many of the kind of serious-minded titles we might expect from the publisher of Robert Frost: poems by Raymond Holden, Mark Schorer's treatise on the political thought of William Blake, a posthumous collection of Ernie Pyle's final WWII dispatches. The pedigree, however, did not impress George Warshow, who reviewed the *Krazy Kat* collection for *The Partisan Review*, dubbing it—with all the certainty of a twenty seven-year-old New York Intellectual—as an example of "Lumpen Culture" (587). Warshow criticizes the strip for its elements of detached fantasy that appeal specifically to the culturally disinterested and the politically alienated. "Working for an audience completely out of touch with the concerns of the serious-minded, [*Krazy Kat* creator] George Herriman had the advantage that Lewis Carroll got by writing for children…Where no art is important, *Krazy Kat* is as real and important a work as any other—it is only supposed to divert its reader for two minutes at a time" (588). Presaging his friend Dwight MacDonald's later work to identify the "midcult," Warshow casts the strip's eponymous character, Krazy, as a representative of the Lumpen class, blissfully and contentedly living in the middle of passionate extremes: neither male nor female, caught between the lofty villainy of Ignatz Mouse and the strident morality of Offisa Pup, blinded by romantical notions to the motives of any other

character. “It is a very nice universe for Krazy,” Warshow patronizes, “if there is an issue, Krazy does not understand it; he loves to be hit by the brick, but he respects Offisa Pup’s motives” (589-90). Warshow finds this uninterrogated middle attitude inexcusable, and even politically reckless: an irresponsibly blasé outlook that allowed for atrocities like the Nazi internment camps to occur.

*Krazy Kat*, however, often explores the potential of the middle to provide playful refuge in a world of binary value systems and authoritarian extremes. One strip included in that 1946 collection, originally published in March of 1937, features Offisa Pup attempting to draw a literal ethical line in sand. As he paints a white stripe across the landscape, he declares to the unusually silent and contemplative Ignatz that if he crosses the line, Pup will “scatter [him] like ashes” (Herriman 23). Pup then points out that he’s created a sign to add semiotic weight to his edict: a long wooden plank reading “Mouse, stay on *this* side of the line!!!” While Offisa Pup lays down his law to Ignatz, the landscape around them shifts in characteristic *Krazy Kat* style, making it difficult for a reader to understand exactly where the line is located in space. In one panel, a three-stepped butte rises behind Ignatz as he stares at the line on the ground; two panels later, our line of sight shifts 180-degrees, as Offisa Pup crosses the line to demonstrate his sign, but now there is a very similar butte in the background of the *other* side. The landscape itself disorients us from ever feeling certain we know which side of the line we’re standing on as readers. In the final panel, Pup wanders off, congratulating himself for clearly cordoning off good from evil: “On one side—the good, the genteel, the gracious—on the other side the sinful, the shameful, the seditious—they shall not meet.” Meanwhile, Krazy, the consummate middle-person, wanders into the scene to stare at the

sign and ask Ignatz, in a dialect always caught between regions, "An witch is *our* side, dollin?" Ignatz, hands on hips, replies blandly, "this side"—making a double punchline out of Pup's moral certainty by convincing Krazy to stay on Ignatz's side of the line while also, with his ambiguous directional pronoun, rhetorically questioning which side is which. Pup has attempted to construct a border to divide the world into a clean moral binary—clearly resonant of so many of the events shaping the world in 1937—in order to protect the guileless Krazy, but Ignatz finds a place for himself on neither side of Pup's line. Or maybe it's on both sides? It's just wherever "this side" is.

As long as there has been art, and certainly as long as there have been social classes, there have been those who attempt to shore up their cultural authority by drawing lines between types of creative production and assigning a mythos of value to each side. *Krazy Kat*'s aptitude for muddling binaries, both as a theme of its content and in critical appraisals it has received throughout its history, epitomizes the challenge that middlebrow culture poses to just that sort of sorting activity. For the culturally dogmatic, playing the role of Offisa Pup with his can of paint, it's relatively easy to identify the superior position and its dialectical opposite—but the middle often slips the bounds of easy identification. Since the word "middlebrow" entered the American lexicon, scholars and cultural pundits have struggled to define it: what exactly *is* the "culture" of the middle? What constitutes it? Who decides its value? Erica Brown and Mary Grover posit that middlebrow culture proves continually elusive because the very activity of drawing lines is a dubious one: "The middlebrow is difficult to define…because, as a product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority, it is itself unstable" (Brown and Grover 2).

Q. D. Leavis's 1931 *Fiction and the Reading Public* provides a prime example of both the pretension intrinsic to the work of cultural classification and the difficulty of charting a clear middle. In her introduction, Leavis introduces the stakes of her project by pointing out that scholarship and criticism only pay attention to a small proportion of novelistic output—those novels mostly ignored by the majority of the reading public in England. Most people do not read what the critics read, but what they do read has "an enormous influence upon the minds and lives of the English people" (xiii). As Erica Brown notices, the fate of the republic seems to hinge, for Leavis, on having a clear categorization of the echelons taste, so as to demonstrate that "literary culture is in a process of disintegration, soon to be dominated by 'lowbrow pulp,' and more threateningly, the middlebrow" (Brown "Introduction"). Describing her methodology as "anthropological" (Leavis xv), Leavis set out to divide the reading public into segments, charting three distinct strata of literary culture—highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow—each with its own ecosystem of novelistic tastes and professional taste-makers. The lowbrow comprises "bestsellers" and the high-circulation daily and Sunday papers where those books are advertised; the "'safe' academic attitude" of the *Times Literary Supplement* provides the guiding voice of the highbrow, summarizing plot and technical merits of more technically complex novels for those readers up to the challenge of more high-minded literary pursuits (Leavis 20). The middlebrow novel is something truly in-between: it reads easily, like a bestseller, but provides at least a veneer of literariness so that its reader can walk away "with the agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring fatigue" (37). More than the other two publics, middlebrow readers are particularly susceptible to being told what to read by "a handful of cheap

weeklies that satisfy a demand for literary gossip and information about the readableness of books" (20). Leavis projects boundaries between these categories that are clear and impermeable: "A novel received with unqualified enthusiasm in a lowbrow paper will be cooly treated by the middlebrow and contemptuously dismissed if mentioned at all by the highbrow Press; the kind of book that the middlebrow Press will admire wholeheartedly the highbrow reviewer will diagnose as pernicious; each has a following that forms a different level of public" (20-21).

The way Leavis maps and then cordons off the middle reveals her own insecurities about her position of authority and her ability to differentiate the truly "literary" from something else. Leavis can't quite get her hands around the middle that she has created. She writes about middlebrow readers as if they represent a single point of view: someone who postures at intellectualism but never really approaches a text with critical earnestness. At one point, she jabs at the "characteristic middlebrow attitude of disavowing seriousness after enjoying the unaccustomed sensation of profundity" (Levis 327). When it comes to classifying middlebrow *authors*, however, she breaks them into two categories: the "'Middlebrow' read as 'literature'" and the " 'Middlebrow not read as 'literature,' but not writing for the lowbrow market" (45). This taxonomy does not quite line up with Leavis's portrait of the middlebrow reader: the middlebrow point of view Leavis describes would obviously gravitate toward the former category of middlebrow author, but that still leaves a body of work in the middle that doesn't have a clear readership. Nicola Humble notes that Leavis's fuzzy categorization stems from anxieties about intellectual self-justification. Leavis is just one of a group of interwar critics who draw lines in the cultural sand for fear of losing their intellectual authority, who "all

return repeatedly to their various models of literary culture preoccupied with the central question: what can be ruled out in order to validate and place as securely 'literary' that which is ruled in" (Humble "Sitting Forward" 43).

The middle is a hard territory to categorize—not just for Leavis—because it takes so many forms: middle can, of course, mean any position in between two extremes. It can also, though, mean ambivalence or omnism, embracing both extremes at once. The middle can work to bring two sides together, through translation or mediation. Or it can mean neutrality or indecision, apolitical detachment or Bartlebian refusal. Even the most well-meaning scholars of the past century have found it difficult to talk about the middlebrow without slipping into either arbitrary self-defeating categorization or impenetrable post-structural mysticism, and so I don't presume in this essay to offer a definitive alternative system of classification. Rather, this essay examines how critics throughout the twentieth century have grappled with middlebrow culture since the word "middlebrow" entered the English language in the 1910s. Critics have deployed various methodologies to define and understand a culture of middleness: rounding up catalogs of specific artists or creative productions that fall just short of some standard of creative purity, theorizing the relationships between art and commerce that mold a sort of middling aesthetic taste, or analyzing the identities and habits of a certain type of middle-class cultural consumer. These theories of the middlebrow often fall into the trap of defining middlebrow culture from outside itself, as a means of controlling it—or even eliminating it altogether—charting zones of "neither/nor" middleness that is neither good nor really fully bad. Virginia Woolf's excoriation of the middlebrow as someone interested in "neither art itself nor life itself" provides perhaps the most infamous version

of this kind of neither/nor definition of the middle, but she has hardly worked alone.[3] Across methodologies and throughout the past century, critics have relied on a neither/nor logic to cordon off the middle as a kind of cultural ghetto, often motivated by their own anxieties about intellectual authority and artistic legitimacy.

When we pay attention to how critics configure middleness as they define middlebrow culture, however, we catch a glimpse of its power to dismantle the fetishized structures of cultural evaluation. "Studying the location of the middlebrow," Janet Galligani Casey has mused, "reminds us that art, too, is subject to the slings and arrows of fortune, and that its 'success' or 'failure' sometimes has as much to do with cultural manoeuverings [sic] as with a transcendent literariness or lack of it" (34). As an alternative, then, this essay offers examples of middlebrow-ness defined by middlebrows themselves, using a logic of "both/and" to frame the middle as a place of eclecticism and negotiation of cultural value. Rather than understand middlebrow culture as a fixed collection of artifacts or a classed relationship to art, the middlebrow represents a position, an approach to understanding the worth of creative production that recontextualizes binary standards of aesthetic value and pushes back against myths of authenticity and autonomy.

**Charting the Middle**

The main challenge of middlebrow culture, for those like Q. D. Leavis who hope to contain it, is that it often spreads. Once you start looking for examples of cultural middleness, you see them everywhere. For mid-century critics like Clement Greenberg,

[3] See chapter I for a longer evaluation of Virginia Woolf's attitude toward the middlebrow.

the middlebrow presents like an infectious disease. Less than a year after Warshow's *Krazy Kat* review, Greenberg also takes to the pages of *The Partisan Review* to warn that "…middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere, devaluing the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest, and stultifying the wise. Insidiousness is of its essence, and in recent years its avenues of penetration have become infinitely more difficult to detect and block" (879). Middleness puts the pure in peril, breaking down boundaries that critics place around certain creative productions to keep them clean of complexity—not complexity of style, but complexity of reception. Greenberg ends his essay by cautioning apocalyptically that even "respectable people" mistake William Saroyan as a serious author. (Imagine Clement's pique when, two years later, Saroyan won a Pulitzer.) If any work of art can find itself caught in the middle of a debate about value, then what's left to claim as truly and purely valuable?

As we all now understand far too well, as I write this, one of the first steps to containing an epidemic is understanding how to identify the disease, and thereby test for it. Throughout the twentieth century, critics have taken just this approach to the middlebrow, attempting to index it in order to stymy its spread. Pointing provides the simplest methodology: creating a catalog of specific middlebrow specimens to ascertain the characteristics intrinsic to middleness. Leavis employs a methodology of pointing in *Fiction and the Reading Public* but some of the most revealing roundups of middlebrow culture have come in the form of diagrams, primarily published in magazines and with a variety of intentions.

The best-known of these diagrams was initially meant as a parody of self-serious cultural categorizers like Clement Greenberg. In 1949, *Harper's* editor Russell Lynes

responded to the cultural battle lines materializing in *The Partisan Review*, and elsewhere, by publishing an essay entitled "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" that winkingly portrays the American cultural hierarchy as something of a food web: highbrows consume the cultural productions of artists (who apparently manage to escape the brow system completely); middlebrows subsist, like carrion birds, on the critical productions of the highbrows; the lowbrow, like a docile herbivore, wants only "to be comfortable and to enjoy himself without having to worry about whether he has good taste or not" (Lynes "Reprint" 152), but his patterns are surveilled by highbrows and middlebrows waiting (though for different reasons) to domesticate him. Lynes concludes his essay by acknowledging the highly bounded cultural politics that would result "If Highbrows Ruled":

> The highbrows would like, of course, to eliminate the middlebrows and devise a society that would approximate an intellectual feudal system in which the lowbrows do the work and create folk arts, and the highbrows do the thinking and create fine arts. All middlebrows, presumably, would have their radios taken away, be suspended from society until they had agreed to give up their subscriptions to the Book-of-the-Month, turned their color reproductions over to a Commission for the Dissolution of Middlebrow Taste, and renounced their affiliation with all educational and other cultural institutions whatsoever. (158)

If the Leavises and Greenbergs of the world were to have their way, the middle would be quarantined out of existence altogether, leaving only the pure highbrow life of the mind and the pure lowbrow life of work.

Until the advent of that sanitized utopia, however, Lynes registers a more complex ecosystem of cultural consumption. His essay was such a hit in *Harper's* that he republished an excerpt three months later in *Life*, accompanied by a diagram illustrating specific artifacts of each cultural echelon (Figure 1, next two pages; Lynes *Life* 100-101). The chart graphs the "everyday tastes" of the low-brow, lower middle-brow, upper middle-brow, and high-brow, representing each with a drawing of a head hearkening back to the phrenological origins of the categories. In each division of taste—which range from the laughably broad, "entertainment," to the laughably specific, "salads"—the four categories present related examples of cultural fare. The chart pokes fun in equal measure at all four brow classes. There are, for example, scare-quotes included in the highbrow's preferred drink, "A glass of 'adequate little' red wine," calling out the upper-classes predilection for pretentious meiosis. Meanwhile, the musical choice of the lowbrow, simply "Jukebox," playfully suggests the lowbrow's lack of any musical preference whatsoever.

While the individual entries make for entertaining reading—and contain some eerie contemporary relevance, like Planned Parenthood as the *cause célèbre* of the upper middle-brow—the structure of the chart provides more insight into how Lynes thought about the middle. Like Leavis, Lynes does not settle on a unified middle, opting instead to split middlebrow culture into two strata. The upper middle-brow exhibits a diluted version of highbrow culture, its entries all overly ornamental or passé signifiers of cultural consumption: neo-classical sculpture, dry martinis, earthy highbrow salads but with tomatoes and Roquefort thrown in. The lower middle-brow, by contrast, is represented by items more ostentatious but comfortably mass-produced: book-of-the-

**Figure 1.** Illustrative chart from Russell Lynes's essay "High-brow, Low-brow, Middle-brow," *Life*, 11 April 1949.

**Figure 1 (continued).**

# LOW-BROW ARE CLASSIFIED ON CHART

| DRINKS | READING | SCULPTURE | RECORDS | GAMES | CAUSES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| A glass of "adequate little" red wine | "Little magazines," criticism of criticism, avant garde literature | Calder | Bach and before, Ives and after | Go | Art |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| A very dry Martini with lemon peel | Solid nonfiction, the better novels, quality magazines | Maillol | Symphonies, concertos, operas | The Game | Planned parenthood |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Bourbon and ginger ale | Book club selections, mass circulation magazines | Front yard sculpture | Light opera, popular favorites | Bridge | P. T. A. |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Beer | Pulps, comic books | Parlor sculpture | Jukebox | Craps | The Lodge |

month club books and store-bought salad dressing. With these two versions of the middle, Lynes anticipates the problem of middleness that would bring Dwight MacDonald to similarly split middlebrow culture into mid-cult and mass-cult: the middle is not just one thing; there are many different models of middleness. The upper middle-brow in Lynes's chart embodies a not-quite model of middleness, just a few rungs down from purity but trying to figure out how to climb. The lower middle-brow personifies the middleness of the bland, clean and presentable but devoid of zest or difficulty.

The structure of Lynes's diagram demonstrates another model of middleness: progression. The chart's structure encourages top-down reading: the upper middle-brow's taste in salad, for example, refers up to the high-brow's taste. In his original *Harper's* essay, Lynes published a first stab at a brow chart that focused more specifically on visual arts as indicators of high, middle, and lowbrow culture (Figure 2, below; Lynes

**Figure 2.** Illustrative chart from Russell Lynes's essay "High-brow, Low-brow, Middle-brow," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1949.

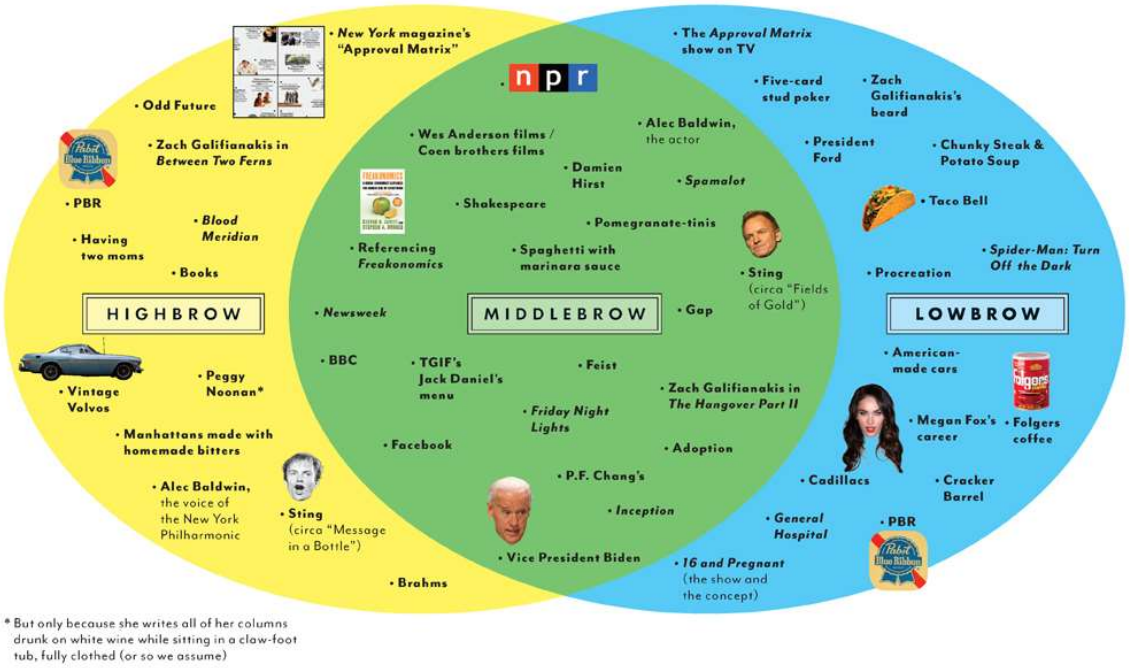
"Reprint"). This original diagram lacks the bipartite middlebrow but also demonstrates visually the way taste trickles down the hierarchy as time progresses: Lynes categorizes Whistler's "Arrangement in Gray and Black, No. 1" as highbrow in the last decades of the nineteenth century, middlebrow by the 1910s, and lowbrow by the '40s—stripped of its striking qualities by broad cultural circulation and renamed simply to "Whistler's Mother." Conversely, popular culture in this chart has a way of gaining ascendency once time has made it fashionably obscure: D. W. Griffith's "The Crossroads of Life," for example, debuts on the chart as lowbrow in the 1910s but comes back as highbrow in the 1940s once pop culture has moved on and made it a collector's item. Lynes's latter chart hints at this temporal ebb and flow of cultural signifiers by representing a trickle-down system of culture, in which highbrows weigh in first and all others form their tastes in accordance. But reflecting on the diagram three decades later, Lynes recognized that his distinctions between brows were held in place only by time: "As I look at the chart, which a *Life* editor and I concocted over innumerable cups of coffee 27 years ago, it strikes me, as it must you, that what was highbrow then has become distinctly upper middlebrow today…Who regards an Eames chair as highbrow now?" (Lynes "Postscript" 160). The boundaries of taste only appear clear in a snapshot of time, and retrospect has a way of placing all culture in the middle.

Seemingly once every decade since 1949, a cultural critic rediscovers Lynes and publishes a new diagram of browed culture—always, again, revealing more about their own contemporary view on middleness than anything about culture itself. In 2011, as the middlebrow was experiencing a twenty first-century reemergence, *GQ* published an article on middlebrow taste, for the subtitle of which the author declares: "Hi, my name is

Devin Friedman, and I like Sting. And, yes, I'm wearing J. Crew. And I could really go for a Chipotle burrito. I'm middlebrow. Admit it. So are you." In the twelve steps of cultural recovery, the first step is to admit you have a problem, Friedman initially intones with self-deprecation. But the real problem, he comes to reason, is that this kind of attitude assigns inherent value to cultural productions that vary depending on how you look at them. "I mean, is a T-shirt highbrow just because it costs $345 and says Maison Martin Margiela on it?" ("The Taste That Dare Not Speak Its Name").

To demonstrate this muddle, Friedman's article includes a chart of its own—but this one takes the form of a Venn Diagram, a diagrammatic structure already more ambivalent than Lynes's clear hierarchy (Figure 3, below). The chart proposes another model of middleness: the overlap. Here, the middlebrow comprises a center space that is

**Figure 3.** Illustrative chart from Devin Friedman's essay "Middlebrow: The Taste That Dare Not Speak Its Name," *GQ*, June 2011.



*both* lowbrow and highbrow. The artifacts that fall into the middlebrow center of the Venn—as diverse as Shakespeare, *Friday Night Lights*, and adoption—are middlebrow because they appeal to both highbrows and lowbrows, and apparently for the same reasons. By contrast, PBR beer shows up twice, separately for lowbrow and highbrow. PBR appeals to highbrows and lowbrows for different reasons but Vice President Biden brings all tastes together in the same way.[4] By no means more rigorous than Lynes's chart, the *GQ* chart does demonstrate the potential of middlebrow culture at which Lynes hints but doesn't fully articulate with his parodic critique of the cultural boundaries drawn by mid-century critics like Greenberg: it portrays a model of middleness that understands the perspectives of both high and low simultaneously.

**What To Do about Bourdieu**

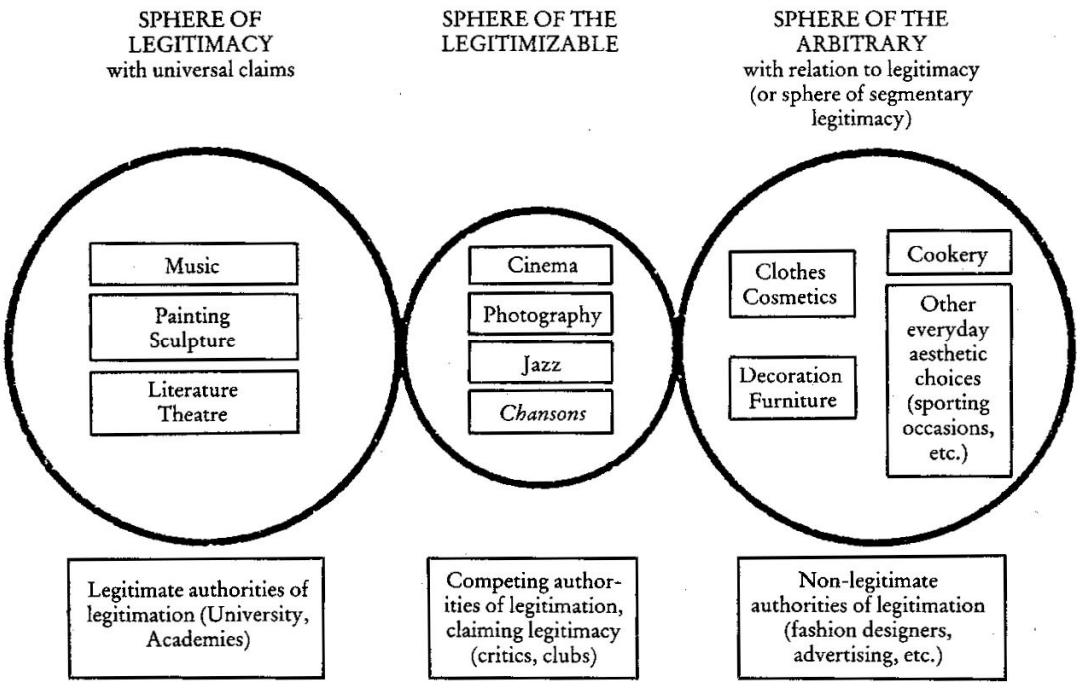
Arguments about cultural taste, whether they come in the form of a doctoral dissertation or chart in a mass-circulation magazine, often, of course, revolve around a central question of legitimacy: who is qualified to judge the value of art—or any commodity, at that rate. When a critic drags in the middlebrow, it's often to shore up a position of authority against a threatening mass of undiscriminating consumers who feed out of the hands of advertisers and other cultural mediators. In a response to Russell Lynes's brow chart, for example, *Life* writer Winthrop Sargeant—a self-described highbrow, recognizable as such because he "eschew[s] Rocquefort on my salad"—explains that he has chosen his preferred brand of pipe tobacco because its manufacturer does not condescend to him with advertising that claims the tobacco is popular or good

[4] Additional proof that middlebrow boundaries change over time. It's unlikely that Joe Biden would similarly chart in a version of this diagram updated for 2020.

for him. “I would even smoke an inferior tobacco if that was the only way I could have the pleasure of ignoring mass opinion and mass salesmanship” (102). Sargeant views himself as an autonomous consumer, blessed with an awareness of the cultural politics of capitalism that middlebrows lack, and therefore justified in making decrees on which cultural phenomena are valuable and which belong in the “overwhelming flood of cultural sewage” produced merely to grab dollars from the “oafish classes” (102).

Evolving beyond a methodology of pointing, scholars who have grappled with this question of legitimacy in their examinations of middlebrow culture have turned instead to a cultural studies methodology, relying on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to situate the middlebrow in his theory of a cultural field. Bourdieu himself initially deployed a diagram to chart his understanding of cultural formation. Writing in 1965 on “The Social Definition of Photography,” Bourdieu concludes that “the various systems of expression, from theatre to television, are objectively organized according to a hierarchy independent of individual opinions, which defines *cultural legitimacy* and its gradations” (“Hierarchy of Legitimacies” 95). He illustrates this conclusion with a diagram that splits the territories of this so-called objective organization among three “spheres” (Figure 4, next page). On the far left side, a circle representing the “Sphere of Legitimacy” circumscribes genres of high art—music (presumably classical), painting/sculpture, literature/theatre; on the far right, another circle, representing the “Sphere of the Arbitrary,” circumscribes genres of everyday consumption (clothing, cosmetics, furniture, cookery). In between, an inexplicably smaller circle titled the “Sphere of the Legitimizable” contains the genres of what Bourdieu called *l’art moyen*: cinema, photography, jazz, and pop songs (*chansons*). Bourdieu explains that the spheres are

**Figure 4.** Illustrative chart from Pierre Bourdieu's "The Social Definition of Photography," 1965.




"organized according to a type of systematic arrangement…based precisely upon the *class ethos*" of the consumers that prefer them, foreshadowing his later theories that would more explicitly map the smaller middle sphere onto the desire of the *petit bourgeoisie* to acquire social legitimization (98). At this early stage, it's unclear whether Bourdieu places these genres in the middle sphere because he recognizes in them some aesthetic qualities that make them *almost* legitimate, or because they are preferred by middle-class consumers who themselves hope to become socially legitimized. Regardless, even at this early stage in his career, Bourdieu encodes certain cultural phenomena, and their subscribers, with an intrinsic middleness, diminutive but striving.

Bourdieu would go on to revise his theories of cultural formation, placing the middle sphere of *l'art moyen* into more complex spatial metaphors than his simple diagram, and paving a path for the next generation of scholars to theorize middlebrow

culture. In "The Market of Symbolic Goods," Bourdieu envisions a "cultural field" as a kind of battleground, on which opposing forces fight to win the adherence of individual artists and institutions. The advantage of this model, according to Beth Driscoll, is that it no longer relies on a methodology of pointing done by one self-empowered critic but rather allows us to account for the complex interplay of different kinds of capital—economic, cultural, social—as well as the influence of a range of cultural stakeholders—not only artists, but also reviewers, academics, publishers, critics and, yes, advertisers. Rather than refer to some essentialized standard of artistic value, Bourdieu's metaphor of the cultural field opens up a more complex interrogation of "the ways that the word middlebrow is put to work—which people use it, what positions do they occupy, and what relationships do they have with others in the field?" (Driscoll 15). Scholars often refer to Bourdieu's cultural field for a ready-made sociological theory of the middlebrow on the back of which they can deploy arguments about audience and cultural value. Phillip Brian Harper, for example, recently employed Bourdieu to designate Ken Burns's *Jazz* as the primary vehicle for a conventional, middlebrow understanding of jazz aesthetics, because the documentary series epitomizes "nonexpert audience's aspirational engagement with relatively arcane 'high-artistic' practices" (207). Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field feels both flexible and rigorous enough to explain middlebrow culture without referring any essentialized catalog of taste.

That is, however, as long as we agree that Bourdieu's *moyen* means the same thing as middlebrow—a translational certainty that scholars of the past thirty years have not interrogated as well as they should. Bourdieu himself never used the word "middlebrow" directly. Rather, it owes to one of his earliest translators, Richard Kind,

who decided while translating Bourdieu's best-known work, *La Distinction,* in 1984, that "middlebrow" would be the best English word to convey the cultural middleness of Bourdieu's *moyen*. Thus, *l'art moyen* becomes "middle-brow art" and *la culture moyenne* becomes "middle-brow culture" not just in Kind's translations but in the majority of translations that have followed. Caroline Pollentier argues very convincingly that each term actually has its own vexed history, specific to its respective national context, and the two should not be conflated. Throughout Bourdieu's body of work, he uses the phrase *culture moyenne*—which translates more literally to "average culture"—to denote the attitudes of the *classe moyenne*, the cultural expressions of which constitutes *l'art moyen*. *Moyen* also carries traces of the pejorative *français moyen*—a stereotype for the average French consumer, often a housewife, used primarily by the cultural elite in the 1960s to dismiss middle-class cultural practices (Pollentier 40). Pollentier parses Bourdieu's tone in the original French to argue that the negative connotation of *français moyen* persists in Bourdieu's *culture moyenne*, into which he unreflexively injects disdain for the stereotypical (and specifically mid-century French) average person (41). Not only does Bourdieu's very framework carry "a restrictively negative assessment" of "average" cultural practices, rehearsing a contempt similar to Greenberg's or Leavis's, but scholars who unproblematically equate *moyen* and middlebrow carry that culturally specific contempt unnecessarily across linguistic and semantic borders.

What's more, Bourdieu's tacit disdain for the middle eventually led him to drop the middle altogether from his theories of cultural formation, ceding what was once an aspirational but still distinct middle space over fully to a binary structure of legitimacy. In *The Rules of Art*, one of Bourdieu's final attempts to describe a system of cultural

formation, he drops all mention of *l'art moyen* and refers instead to the category of "commercial art" that he places in direct binary confrontation with "pure production" (*Rules of Art* 121). The field of literary production, at this point in his career, comes down to these two forces, vying against each other for a "monopoly of the *power of consecration*"—the right to define the categories of judgement (224). With this revision of his earlier model of cultural formation, as Pollentier asserts, Bourdieu reduces the field to "an alternative between legitimate art and non-legitimate art," leaving very little space for middleness (Pollentier 43). Not only that, Bourdieu stacks the deck in favor of legitimacy: "when the defenders of the most 'pure,' the most rigorous and the narrowest definition of belonging declare that a certain number of artists (etc) are not *really* artists, or that they are not *true* artists, they deny them existence *as* artists" (Bourdieu *Rules of Art* 223). Because the proponents of "pure art"—autonomous art, art for art's sake—already, in Bourdieu's model, hold the title of legitimacy, they always already win any argument about the value of art.

In his original diagram, Bourdieu theorizes a neither/nor model of cultural middleness, neither quite fully commercial nor pure of commercial influence; when he eliminates the middle Bourdieu ascribes insubstantiality to that form of middleness, making the middle, instead, a non-space. Despite coming from wholly different ideological direction, Bourdieu arrives at conclusions about cultural boundaries similar to those of the New York Intellectuals. *Slate* culture blogger David Haglund hints, in a brief commentary inspired by the 2011 reissue of Dwight Macdonald's *Masscult and Midcult*, that the semantic properties middleness lead naturally to a neither/nor model of the middle, regardless of whether one names it middlebrow, midcult, or *moyen*: "Neither

quite one thing or another, 'middle' suggests something mushy and unsure of itself" ("Is Middlebrow Still an Insult?"). Virginia Woolf's definition of middlebrow echoes through Haglund's diction. The middle *can* imply a host of other pejoratives: mediocre, banal, indecisive, flavorless. This version of the middle begs for dominance, for some savvy critic or connoisseur to contain it, set it aside, and draw our attention to works that contain more life, more verve, more value. Critics who reinforce this neither/nor model by building a theory of the middlebrow on a foundation of Bourdieu's *moyen*, therefore rob the category of its agency.

**Middle-Class Problems**

Theorizing the middlebrow through a neither/nor model of middleness, then, not only posits a problematic "semantic fuzziness," as Caroline Pollentier contends, it also problematically depletes the rhetorical position of a middlebrow perspective within the discourse of cultural formation. Most middlebrow scholars of the current generation agree on the importance of moving configurations of middlebrow culture away from a logic of domination, and of reserving the "power of consecration" for those who identify *as* middlebrow rather than who wished to control (or squash altogether) anything that smacks of middleness. In order to achieve this goal, middlebrow scholars must let go of not only Bourdieu's models but also any other socio-cultural theorization that relies on what Mary Grover refers to as "the residual power of the Marxist 'common sense' view" that middlebrow literary culture has no intrinsic value but rather comprises a flow of empty commodities "produced to satisfy an ideologically impoverished readership" (*Ordeal of Warwick Deeping* 28). These models tend to rob middlebrow writers and

readers of their agency, wrapping them in a shroud of false consciousness inside of which they believe that they're acquiring the cultural capital necessary to achieve legitimacy while, instead, through their eagerness to purchase cultural commodities, they are naively complicit in their own social domination. Any cultural theory that wishes to assign any amount of agency to middlebrow readers and writers—any capacity for reflection, choice, thought—must configure middlebrow culture in a way that avoids neither/nor models of middleness.

Over the past two decades, a handful of scholars have worked to reclaim middlebrow agency by focusing not on the artifacts or the formation of middlebrow culture but on its consumers, the middlebrows themselves. Beth Driscoll, working specifically on literary culture, relies on middlebrow identity politics to synthesize recent scholarly perspectives into a list of eight characteristics of middlebrow literary culture, each grounded in the identities and preferences of readers who identified with some type of middle perspective. However, some of the Driscoll's eight tenets of the middlebrow continue to simplify its complexity. She begins her index of the middlebrow, for example, with the deceptively tidy assertion that "the middlebrow is middle-class" (Driscoll 17). Driscoll is not alone in this argument: many contemporary scholars begin their definitions of middlebrow culture by tying it inextricably to middle class life—though often not as explicitly as Driscoll does.

An equivalency between the middle class and the middlebrow seems initially obvious: viewed through a Marxist lens, culture is, primarily, an expression of class ethos; therefore, the social anxieties of a particular class will dictate both its creative expression and its cultural consumption. Nicola Humble makes this exact argument when

she asserts that "the middlebrow is an essentially middle-class category, one which speaks directly to the preoccupations of its intended consumers" ("Sitting Forward" 44). Describing those preoccupations, though, in order to get a practical understanding of what exactly constitutes middlebrow culture, cultivates some very broad socio-economic generalizations about work and leisure. Middle-class wage earners, the argument often goes, desire a strict separation between work and play. They desire entertainment to fill their leisure time and have the expendable income to pay for it. They don't, in the spirit of leisure, want to have to *work* to understand or enjoy the cultural products they choose. Instead they want a pay-off equal to or exceeding the opportunity cost of the money they spend on the cultural offering, measured both in entertainment value and cultural capital. In this broad narrative of middle-class preoccupations, the middlebrow satisfies middle-class desire for culture that feels like art but can be quantified like a product—one that entertains and engages worth its price tag, but without making anyone work too hard.

Such arguments that associate middlebrow culture with the middle class also hinge on class anxieties. Nicola Humble writes that the processes of delineating taste, particularly during the interwar period, "have much in common with the judgements with which class was patrolled: in both cases the act of exclusion is employed [by those concerned about social identity] to strengthen the status of that or those which remain, and in both cases an intense anxiety and feeling of beleaguerment underlies the process" ("Sitting Forward" 45). Beth Driscoll goes even further than simply comparing the processes of class and cultural identity production: relying heavily on Bourdieu's early hierarchical model of cultural legitimacy, she uses class boundaries to schematize the boundaries of taste, agreeing with Bourdieu that "the upper classes are aligned with elite

cultural forms while lower classes are disposed toward popular culture" (Driscoll 18). Driscoll acknowledges critiques that Bourdieu's hierarchical model is too rigid and too situated in the specific cultural circumstances of Cold War-era France. However, she argues, "a cultural hierarchy persists, although in a somewhat loosened form … I see evidence of ongoing contempt for popular fiction. Think of the scorn heaped upon Dan Brown," E. L. James, and other phenomenally popular, but critically-panned, writers (20). Driscoll's evidence, however, is anecdotal and easily discredited. A quick JSTOR search, for example, shows that there have been dozens of scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed journals that take *The Da Vinci Code* as a point of departure into fields as diverse as computer science, psychology, and Arthurian legend. This informal survey of academic attention to popular literature says nothing about whether academics *enjoy* reading the novels of Dan Brown, but it does demonstrate that the novels *can* and *have* been read academically—that there is *something* in even the supposedly basest literature that captures the attention of elite readers.

When scholars like Beth Driscoll and Nicola Humble assert that middlebrow culture is a function of middle-class identity, they make two assumptions in the way that they define the middlebrow. First, that the middlebrow should be measured by its consumers, by what a certain type of people read. Humble is fairly direct about this: for her, the middlebrow is middlebrow "because it was widely read by the middle-class public" and because "twentieth-century middlebrow institutions explicitly targeted middle-class consumers" (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 13). It may be true that people of average prosperity happen to read middlebrow books. Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long (as well as Driscoll herself) have painstakingly explored the habits of

specific groups of middle-class readers who define themselves *as* readers out of their devotion to middlebrow reading: communities of romance novel readers (Radway) and informal book clubs (Long).[5] While many of the readers in these communities may come from the middle class, though, correlation is not causation.

Conflating middlebrow culture with the middle class also assumes that the middlebrow is, necessarily, only a means to an end—that middlebrow readers are always merely highbrow readers-in-training. Daniel Tracy, for example, has described middlebrow writing as primarily conduct literature, "devoted to teaching its readers the contents of high culture" (Tracy "From Vernacular Humor" 116). Nicola Humble, too, explains that her primary genre of interest, what she calls the "feminine middlebrow novel" is "conduct literature, offering its largely middle-middle- and lower-middle-class readers access to the elaborate codes that mark the borders of upper-middle-class identity, allowing them to 'pass' if they read correctly and apply the results of their reading" ("Sitting Forward" 44-45). The middle, in this formulation, is never a destination but rather a rest stop on the way to achieving higher cultural status.

If we scholars subscribe to these assumptions that middlebrow readers are exclusively middle-income strivers hoping to learn how to "pass" as highbrow readers, we give credence to the myth that highbrow culture exists on a plane of greater authority afforded by aesthetic authenticity and freedom from market forces. Fewer and fewer scholars, however, believe this to be true,[6] but the neither/nor middleness that

[5] See Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (2009), and Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003).

[6] Particularly as monolithic modernism has split into "new modernisms," and scholars like Lawrence Rainey have investigated the economic realities of the modernist avant-garde. See Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (1999), and Braddock, *Collecting As Modernist Practice* (2012).

middlebrow studies unwittingly configures by conflating middlebrow culture with middle-class culture shores up the mythology of a more valuable, pure, and autonomous highbrow culture. Despite her own insistence that the middlebrow is conduct literature, Humble argues convincingly that highbrow culture is just as guilty—if not more so—of "cultural manoeuvrings." She points out that the process of literary categorization that so obsessed interwar critics like Leavis creates the illusion of a fixed hierarchy of value, and that highbrow self-fashioning masks "an intense anxiety and feeling of beleaguerment…a sense of fighting a re-guard action that cannot ultimately be won" (Humble "Sitting Forward" 45). Catherine Belsey pulls that argument out of the interwar era and makes it a certainty of cultural formation: "defenders of aesthetic value thrive on moral panic. If we don't make judgements of quality criticism's central task, they insist, masterpieces will be neglected and soap opera will be thought as good as Sophocles" (Belsey 7). By appointing themselves the arbiters of aesthetic judgement, critics create a cultural narrative that places them in power—and downplay other narratives that place cultural value elsewhere. Contemporary scholars who overemphasize the causal relationship between the middlebrow and striving middle-class consumers rehearse a similar logic of domination in cultural formation, despite their best intentions. If the middlebrow is merely middle-class, as Beth Driscoll proclaims, then middlebrow culture has no internal value of its own; rather it defers always to the next step in cultural legitimization like a green salad waiting for someone to remove the Roquefort.

**Stuck in the Middle with Burke**

Some twentieth-century critics who have identified with a middlebrow perspective have attempted to circumnavigate the pitfalls of neither/nor middleness by simply rebranding the middlebrow and broadcasting a semantically sharper variant of the middle. Caroline Pollentier describes how J. B. Priestley, who famously scrapped over brows with Virginia Woolf in the early 1930s, simply redubbed himself a "broadbrow." Hoping to advertise his own middle perspective as one of critical opportunity, Priestley substitutes "broad" for "middle" to claim an ethos of inclusiveness and eclecticism: rather than subscribe to essential boundaries like highbrows, "hag-ridden by conventions," the broadbrow "looks at things simply and steadily and asks himself if they have any value" (qtd Pollentier 45). Pollentier concludes that Priestley "configures middleness" in a way that allows middlebrows a voice in cultural debates: "Priestley redefines middlebrow culture as 'a set of values' rather than an in-between position; a happy medium, produced by a 'balance between emotion and thought.' Middleness therefore emerges as a democratic value in itself, rather than a position 'somewhere between the other two'" (Pollentier 48). In substituting "broad" for "middle," Priestley theorizes a version of middlebrow that looks much more like the *GQ* Venn Diagram: capable of understanding both highbrow and lowbrow perspectives, rather than caught guilelessly between them.

Both/and middleness can be hard to conceptualize. It's more than just a compromise between two opposing perspectives; rather, both/and middleness carves out a distinct perspective that embodies seemingly antagonistic points of view all at once, breaking down the oppositional dialectic relationship between them. Kenneth Burke provides the best model for theorizing of this perspective, particularly when it comes to

understanding both/and middleness as a position in debates about cultural value. A middlebrow thinker himself, who relied as much on puns as on philosophical tenets to express his ideas, Burke often chases after ways to explain how language has the power to perform multiple, sometimes contrary, functions at once. In fact, fundamental to *A Grammar of Motives* and its sister volume, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, is the semantic paradox buried inside the word "substance." In its most common usage, "substance" denotes the essence of a person or thing. Burke, however, finds "a pun lurking behind the Latin roots" of the word, remarking that the word's constitutive parts ("sub" and "stance") add up to indicate "something that stands beneath or supports the person or thing" (Burke *Grammar* 22). As he often does, Burke proceeds to explain and re-explain the paradox, just to make sure we get it: "though used to designate something *within* the thing, *intrinsic* to it, [substance] etymologically refers to something *outside* the thing, *extrinsic* to it. Or otherwise put: the word in its etymological origins would refer to an attribute of the thing's *context*, since that which supports or underlies a thing would be a part of the thing's context" (23). More than just a quirk of language, Burke admits that he "takes the pun seriously" because he sees in it an "*inevitable* paradox of definition" (24). The paradox of substance is that *any* definition, when examined closely enough, necessarily includes properties both intrinsic and extrinsic to the thing it defines—every noun is *both* itself *and* its context.

The paradox of substance has particular significance for dialectical language, with which Burke wrestles in both the *Grammar* and the *Rhetoric*. In the first book, dialectic à la Burke resembles a looser version of Hegelian dialectic. For Burke, dialectic springs from a variety of situations that place otherwise abstract terms in relation to each other,

so that an "interplay" might occur. He muses over a variety of dialectical interplays, various modes of reasoning by which terms tend to "mutually modify one another" (Burke *Grammar* 403). In the end, he finally settles into a working explanation of dialectic, adjusting his semantic zoom lens to see how two words that seem to mean opposite things can also get grouped together in a different context: "Encountering some division, we retreat to a level of terms that allow for some kind of merger (as 'near' and 'far' are merged in the concept of 'distance'); then we 'return' to the division, now seeing it pervaded by the spirit of the 'One' we had found in our retreat" (440). Hegelian dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—provides just one variety of Burkean dialectic, which describes any method of semantic zooming-out that allows an abstract term to be "grounded" in an another term. Dialectic is an extension of the paradox of substance, a certain position from which we can see how ideas cross-pollinate to make meaning.

We can think of the categories of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" as dialectical in the way Burke describes: two seemingly oppositional arguments about culture that rely on each other for meaning. The nouns "highbrow" and "lowbrow" appeared in the English language together around the turn of the twentieth century, and their dual emergence links them as opposites from the start. Lawrence Levine observes that the terms were, of course, adopted from phrenology but soon evolved beyond their pseudo-scientific origins. For Levine, it's no coincidence that the etymology of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" parallels the emergence of the word "culture" in the Arnoldian sense (as opposed to the agricultural sense) as a measure of personal refinement and knowledge.

As "culture" grew into its now more prominent meaning, "highbrow" and "lowbrow" developed into nouns that signify the achievement of culture. More than a

merely a binary configuration, in which one term designates the presence of culture and the other its absence, the terms each came to indicate separate cultural value systems that were individual and yet, as Van Wyck Brooks wrote in his 1915 essay "Highbrow and Lowbrow," inherently contingent. For Brooks, highbrow and lowbrow describe the "incompatible" and yet "complimentary" concerns of theory versus practice, respectively (481), which he believes "divides American life between them" (483). Brooks describes the spheres of each with mutually exclusive and yet equal lists: to the highbrow belongs university ethics, Good Government progressivism, Culture-with-a-capital-C, and the language of academic pedantry. The characteristics of the lowbrow are all perfectly antagonistic to that list: business ethics, Tammany-style corruption, humor writing, and "pavement slang" (483). Highbrow and lowbrow represent polarities, and Brooks claims that American culture is invested in keeping the categories mutually exclusive and yet inseparable, two sides of the same coin. As this kind of dialectic, highbrow and lowbrow are arguments about cultural value that mutually inform each other, prop each other up. We can understand each better by zooming out to see how, together, they map the cultural landscape, and then zooming back in to examine each more closely.

In *The Rhetoric of Motives*, however, Burke evolves his understanding of dialectic by breaking it out of a strictly dualistic logic, removing any lingering resemblance to Hegelian dialectic. His revised dialectic no longer describes a critical methodology for understanding abstract concepts; rather, this version of dialectic describes the work that a certain type of language always performs, itself, in order to make its meaning known. He divides language into two categories: positive terms, which "name *par excellance* the things of experience, the *hunc et nunc* [here and now]" (Burke *Rhetoric* 183), and

dialectical terms, which "refer to *ideas* rather than *things*" (185). Positive terms describe physical entities and differentiate themselves from other physical entities. Burke is not interested in the way that these terms might misfire, in the arbitrary or slippery nature of signifiers, but simply in the *potential* that a certain kind of word has to point to a thing that physically exists. Even though two people might hear the word "house" and picture two different actual houses, "house" is still a positive term for its ability to evoke a physical entity that has "everyday, empirical availability" (184). By distinction, dialectical terms "have no strict location" and generally require "theoretical champions" to proclaim them as principles (185). These champions turn dialectical terms into principles by setting them in opposition to other dialectical terms. And yet the "recipe," as Burke puts it—the complex of ideas and beliefs and references that seem to make up the substance of any particular dialectical term—varies depending on the partner term it's defined against. "Capitalism," he contends, "would look different when compared and contrasted with 'feudalism' than if dialectically paired with 'socialism'" (184). No dialectical term has an automatic, necessary antithesis that always travels alongside it; instead, the substance of any dialectical term relies on a variable context.

Burke dramatizes the dialectic order of language as a kind of parliamentary debate, where the act of debating itself often simplifies each representative's platform to the one plank on which they disagree: "if you organize a conflict among spokesmen [in parliament] for competing principles, you may produce a situation wherein there is no one clear choice. Each of the spokesmen, whose ideas are an extension of special interests, must remain somewhat unconvinced by any solution which does not mean the complete triumph of his partisan interests" (*Rhetoric* 187). The spokesmen each represent

a variety of interests but their most salient interests become "stylistically ennobled" into absolute principles, so that each speaker appears fundamentally opposed to the other. In the dialectic parliament of culture, highbrow and lowbrow can appear fundamentally opposed but each term contains a variety of diverse interests—refinement, intelligence, grit—that shine through in an oppositional way only when the two terms are set in proximity.

Using this revised version of Burkean dialectic as a guide, we can find uses of highbrow and lowbrow as dialectical terms that adopt a complex, vibrant semantic life. For example, in the same month of 1915 that *The Forum* published Van Wyck Brooks's essay on "Highbrow and Lowbrow," a *Collier's* editorial published the results of a poll for which they'd asked readers to define "highbrow" ("The Highbrow Jury Disagrees" 15). The responses suggest that characterizing the relationship between highbrow and lowbrow as antithetical oversimplifies the ways people used the words during the first decades of their existence. The magazine's editors attempt at first to categorize the 215 responses, first by reporting the ones that consider highbrow to be a moral quality, then those that consider it a measure of intelligence, then those that define it as a lack of sincerity. By the second section of the article, the editors devolve into simply listing responses they find clever, like the one that seemingly anticipates the cultural debates of the entire next century: "He will be a highbrow indeed who should promise now what the word will mean ultimately" (15). None of the respondents use the word "lowbrow" in their definition, but instead each sets "highbrow" against a series of other dialectical terms that represent a diverse array of cultural values: common sense, sincerity, stupidity, immorality, humbleness. One respondent, who remarks that the highbrow is someone

"whose brain has extinguished his heart," places highbrow in opposition to empathy (15). From this example, we might come to think of highbrow and lowbrow as separate terms that sometimes pair together and sometimes pair with other concepts—but all within a dialectic order of abstract language.

If highbrow and lowbrow are not intrinsically antithetical, as Burke's "parliamentary wrangle" exposes, then neither do they necessarily form two extremes of a cultural structure that reinforces neither/nor middleness. Highbrow, lowbrow, and middlebrow, as dialectical terms, refer not to catalogs of creative productions, nor even to different classes of people who consume culture, but to positions in various debates about cultural value. And the "substance" of each brow relies on its context, its proximity to other dialectical terms.

**A Middlebrow Reading Position**

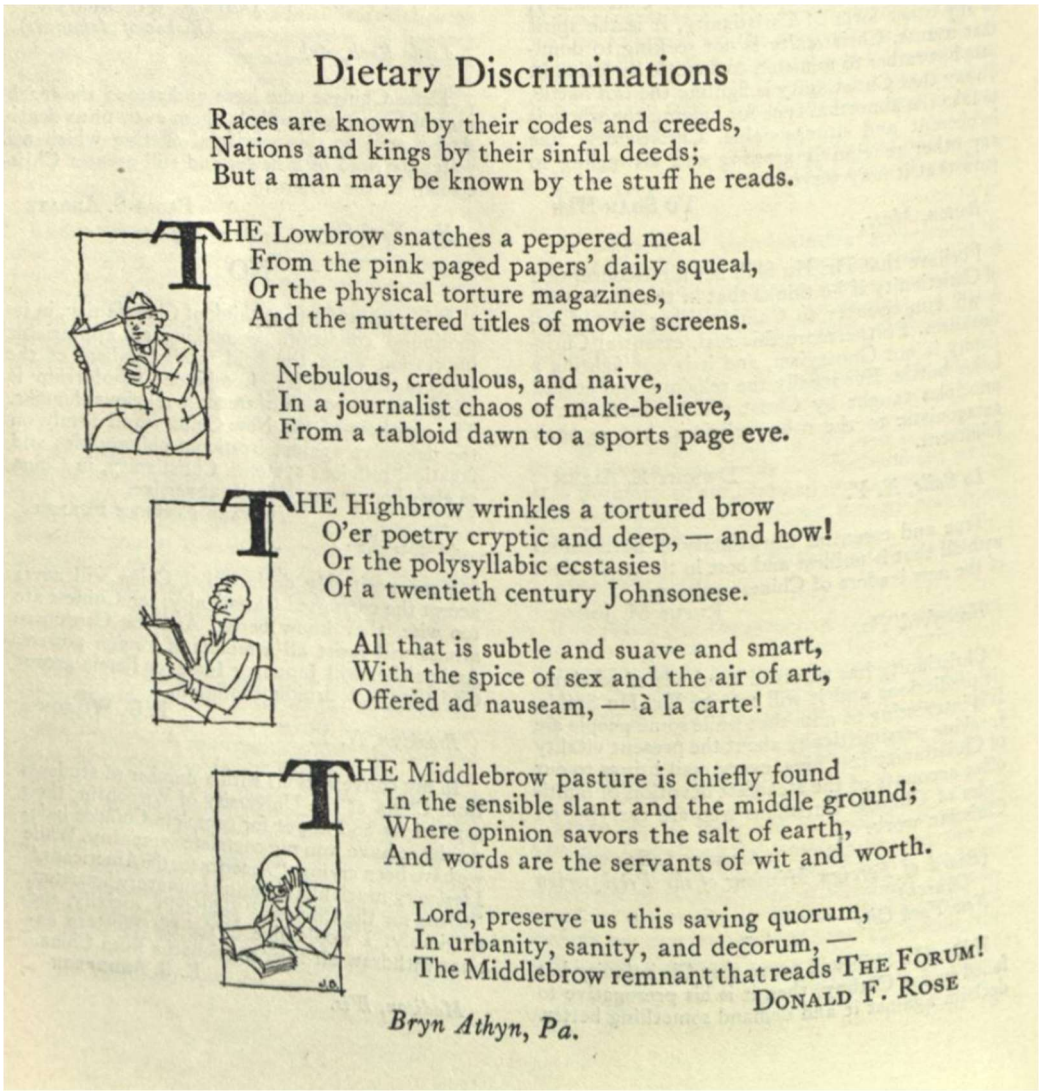
To identify dialectical brows in the wild, as it were, critics must get more creative with their methodology, looking instead for ways to recognize the positions from which people approach cultural texts. Nicola Humble gets very close to building a guide for that kind of identification when she proposes that critics should identify middlebrow literary culture in *how* people read, rather than trying to find "stable intrinsic differences" in who readers are or what they read (Humble "Sitting Forward" 46). Drawing on the theories of Michel de Certeau, Humble suggests that reading practice itself, how "the body is configured in the act of reading," might provide the least problematic way to account for differences in reading cultures: "Books are 'highbrow' if read at a desk, pencil in hand, and middlebrow if read while 'lolling in a chair or lying on the sofa, or on the train.' The

battle of the brows can, on one level, be seen as a matter of sitting forward or sitting back" (47). Humble's proposition eliminates the need to define cultural categories by pointing, as well the categorical slipperiness that occurs when two critics categorize the same text in different ways—when, for example, Q. D. Leavis considers the work of D. H. Lawrence to be "the absolute high point of literary authenticity" while Cyril Connolly condemns him for "swimming in the tide of public taste" (Humble 43). Situating the middlebrow in reading practice, Humble begins to build a theory of the brows flexible enough to categorize Lawrence's writing as middlebrow *or* highbrow, depending on how it's read.

While reconceiving the middlebrow in terms of reading practice allows some categorical flexibility and separates it somewhat from rigid class hierarchies, Humble's description of the middlebrow as a reader who "sits back" hides an accusation of bourgeois comfort. Mixed up in this equation are, once again, classed distinctions between work and leisure, between amateur and professional reading. The middlebrow who "sits back" reads only for pleasure, with little regard for self-reflection or critical rigor. This, however, is not how middlebrows of the interwar period described their own reading habits. The self-styled middlebrow critic Donald Frank Rose—who wrote a "Magazine for Middlebrows" that ran for four years as a syndicated column before it was incorporated, in 1928, into the *North American Review*—makes his own differentiation of reading practices in a 1927 poem, published in *The Forum*, called "Dietary Discriminations." Although the preamble to the poem declares that "a man may be known by the stuff he reads," Rose makes it clear in the following stanzas that *how* that man reads also plays a more pivotal role. Each stanza of the poem, accompanied by a

sketch, wryly depicts the habits of each brow (Figure 5, below). The first, the lowbrow, is a fat man gazing happily at a newspaper, a hat indicating that he's *en route* somewhere. Rose writes that this "nebulous, credulous, and naïve" lowbrow reader "snatches a peppered mean/From the pink paged papers' daily squeal." The next stanza features the highbrow reader, sitting erect in a high collar, looking grimly at the book that he holds up in front of himself. Rose comments that this reader "wrinkles a tortured brow" over

**Figure 5**. Donald Frank Rose's "Dietary Discriminations," published in *The Forum*, September 1927.



Dietary Discriminations

Races are known by their codes and creeds,
Nations and kings by their sinful deeds;
But a man may be known by the stuff he reads.

THE Lowbrow snatches a peppered meal
From the pink paged papers' daily squeal,
Or the physical torture magazines,
And the muttered titles of movie screens.

Nebulous, credulous, and naive,
In a journalist chaos of make-believe,
From a tabloid dawn to a sports page eve.

THE Highbrow wrinkles a tortured brow
O'er poetry cryptic and deep, — and how!
Or the polysyllabic ecstasies
Of a twentieth century Johnsonese.

All that is subtle and suave and smart,
With the spice of sex and the air of art,
Offered ad nauseam, — à la carte!

THE Middlebrow pasture is chiefly found
In the sensible slant and the middle ground;
Where opinion savors the salt of earth,
And words are the servants of wit and worth.

Lord, preserve us this saving quorum,
In urbanity, sanity, and decorum, —
The Middlebrow remnant that reads THE FORUM!

DONALD F. ROSE

*Bryn Athyn, Pa.*

"the polysyllabic ecstasies/Of a twentieth century Johnsonese," examples of which he finds "ad nauseum" and "a la carte."

The final stanza pictures the middlebrow reader, hunched over a book on the table in front of him, his head held in his hands. This appears to be the only truly studious reader, unfettered by the constraints of keeping appointments or keeping up appearances. The final line of the middlebrow stanza reveals a layer of reading practice that Humble ignores: Rose's middlebrow reader—like J. B. Priestley's broadbrow—synthesizes wit, entertainment value, and worth. Reading from a sensible position, the middlebrow is simultaneously capable of both lowbrow reading for information and diversion, and of highbrow reading for aesthetic value. The categorical binary Humble creates between readers who sit forward and readers who sit back would altogether eliminate the "Middlebrow pasture," where Rose's middlebrow reader sits however he likes.

The urge to see the middlebrow reader as one who uncritically "sits back" while reading may have more to do with the cultural and class anxieties of middlebrow scholars themselves. The trepidation that the academy still fosters toward middlebrow culture has a long genealogy of social climbing and cultural acquisition. In a moment of self-reflection that gets very close to exposing the limitations of her own theory, Nicola Humble acknowledges that "Most academics are descendants of that 'new' middle class that gained the cultural ascendency between the wars, but their acquisition of high culture is—just as it was for the lower-middle-class Leavises and their associates—the means by which they established themselves as securely of the upper-middle classes, in perceived status if not income" (46). We scholars have, ourselves, a tendency to talk about middlebrow culture from the outside, to separate ourselves from it by drawing attention

to our own professionalism as readers. Beth Driscoll even builds that separation into her eight-part model of the middlebrow when she asserts that "The middlebrow is recreational": "Middlebrow literary practices are amateur, a word derived from the Latin *amator*, meaning lover. Middlebrow reading is recreational, not academic: the middlebrow is defined outside, and often against, the academy" (36). We scholars can concede that middlebrow readers love what they read, that they feel very intensely about it, but we find it difficult to imbue their reading with any sense of seriousness. This is because, according to Humble, "Middlebrow texts carry within their physical form a threat to status," particularly academic status. This fear, however, asserts again that middlebrow texts have some intrinsic quality that keeps them from warranting our scholarly attention—that middlebrow texts fall into a neither/nor middleness created entirely by their middling value, rather than by our failure to be middling-enough readers.

When Nicola Humble and Beth Driscoll write of the pleasures of middlebrow reading, however, they both get partway to a description of middlebrow reading that does embrace both/and middleness. Although they both refer to recreational pleasure, there is more than one way to enjoy the practice of reading. In *The Pleasure of the Text,* Roland Barthes names these different types of pleasures *plaisir* and *jouissance*. *Plaisir* from a text looks more like contentment: it "comes out of culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (14). *Jouissance*, in contrast, is an uncomfortable kind of pleasure: it "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (14). Catherine Belsey puts it another way: "The text of *plaisir* is one to curl up with; it confirms and reassures. The text of *jouissance* is avant-

garde; it challenges complacency, repudiates good form; it shocks, disturbs, and in the process thrills" (Belsey 8). *Jouissance* is a highbrow aesthetic pleasure, the pleasure of a difficult work of art that shakes the ground of the reader's assumptions. *Plaisir,* on the other hand, feels, to those who value aesthetic ideals, devoid of critical worth.

There are valid reasons why those trained in critical study have a hard time finding value in *plaisir*. First, as Humble points out, it's a quotidian kind of pleasure: anyone can find contentment in reading, whether or not they've endured years of grad school. Valuing this kind of pleasure threatens to render our educations trivial, because it means that "our unique reading skills may not be so unique after all" (Humble "Sitting Forward" 46). Secondly, as Belsey points out, *plaisir* isn't transferable: she quotes the Proust scholar Malcom Bowie, saying "Critics don't get far if they simply say 'look at me, I'm enjoying'" (Belsey 5). That poses problems for those of us whose paychecks rely on our abilities to teach and write about texts. There's very little cultural capital to be found in *plaisir*—since it doesn't exist in a state of scarcity and doesn't require any sort of training—whereas it takes work and training and *taste* to experience *jouissance*, to understand and appreciate and take pleasure in that which unsettles us. *Jouissance* is a skill, and once we've acquired it, we feel we have ascended to a higher level of legitimacy; the joys of *plaisir* seem naïve and pedestrian, and finding value in them feels like a step backward, an undoing of our education and the cultural capital that comes with it. Humble herself admits that, as someone conditioned "over decades of a literary-critical education" to highbrow reading, she has a very difficult time surrendering herself to the pleasures of reading (Humble 46-47).

The middlebrow reader, though, can find both *plaisir* and *jouissance* in a text—not toggling between the two or compromising them, as if they're antithetical extremes, but deconstructing that essentialist binary relationship by appreciating the value of *plaisir* and *jouissance* at the same time. We might think of this as a form of what Marjorie Perloff calls "reading differentially": reading in such a way that allows multiple modes of interpretation to happen simultaneously.[7] Perloff admonishes contemporary humanists for subordinating pleasure to "historical/cultural" critical concerns (16). The loss of pleasure from literary study, she asserts, constitutes a death knoll: "the neo-Puritan notion that literature and the other arts must be somehow 'useful,' and only useful…has produced a climate in which it has become increasingly difficult to justify the study of English or Comparative Literature" (18). Reading differentially, finding a way to read for pleasure while also reading critically, is what will rescue literary studies from triviality. It has always, however, been the skill of the middlebrow reader, who—to develop Humble's thesis—is capable of sitting forward and sitting back while reading, finding *both* "wit" *and* "worth" in what she reads.

**Negotiating Cultural Value**

The middlebrow position, from which a reader engages with multiple value perspectives at once, is therefore situated to do a certain kind of analytical work. In Beth Driscoll's eight-part formula for the middlebrow, she declares that "the middlebrow is

[7] I'll cop to taking this term somewhat out of temporal context. Perloff conceives of differential reading as uniquely post-structuralist, a skill necessitated by "the endless discourse of *isms* and *izations* (as in *globalization*) that confronts us today (xxvi). Catherine Belsey articulates skepticism that of Perloff truly does call for pleasure that combines *jouissance* and *plaisir*, finding Perloff's brand of pleasure still too reliant on aesthetic standards of judgement (Belsey 6).

mediated" and that middlebrow culture "makes explicit the connection between writers, readers and the intermediaries who present literary works to the public" (25). In formulations of the middlebrow that rely on neither/nor models of middle-class middleness, middlebrow readers merely rely on institutions to tell them what's valuable, whether those institutions are commercial (publishers), critical (reviewers) or both (book clubs). Driscoll's argument that "the middlebrow is mediated" refers to a system of second-hand cultural consumption, in which critics act as intermediaries between middlebrows and the cultural products they consume. Middlebrow culture fashioned from a both/and model of middleness, however, reveals a different role for mediation: the constant mediation of taste that middlebrow readers make, *themselves*, through the very act of reading like a middlebrow.

Middlebrow mediation appears in the pride that writers and critics often took in their ability to appreciate a wide array of cultural offerings, as the editor of *Popular Radio* in 1924 does when he asserts his enjoyment of "a little jazz, a little classical music, a little dance music, once in a while an old-fashioned song" ("Are You a Middlebrow"). This ability also plays a prominent role for those scholars who have searched for methods of describing middlebrow aesthetics that go beyond merely cataloging its artifacts. Ina Haberman writes that middlebrow texts "negotiate and express the values, world views and mentalities of a large part of the population" (Haberman 32). Faye Hammill also uses the word "negotiate" to describe what makes middlebrow culture unique and important.[8] Hammill takes issue with Nicola Humble's assertion that "Middlebrow fiction laid claim to the highbrow by assuming an easy familiarity with its key texts and attitudes, while

[8] See Chapter III for a longer discussion of Hammill's use of the word "negotiate."

simultaneously caricaturing intellectuals as self-indulgent and naïve" (Humble *Feminine Middlebrow* 29). Instead, Hammill argues, "middlebrow fiction did not always simply 'lay claim' to the highbrow, it frequently expanded and challenged earlier definitions of art in intellectual work. In borrowing from both modernist and mass cultural forms, it diminished the apparent distance between them" (Hammill *Women, Celebrity* 11). Middlebrow culture, that is, mediates the values of cultural discourse without simplifying or compromising them.

The critic who best demonstrated the middlebrow aptitude for negotiation was Gilbert Seldes. Throughout 1922, Seldes worked simultaneously to publish *The Waste Land* in *The Dial* (of which he was then managing editor) and to write essays in defense of popular cultural forms like Vaudeville and *Krazy Kat*. Faye Hammill admonishes scholars like Michael North, who read Seldes's work through a lens of antagonistic cultural binaries. Although North acknowledges Seldes for bringing together the avant-garde with the popular, he reads Seldes as a master of compartmentalization rather than synthesis, ultimately maintaining "the dualistic understanding of early-twentieth-century culture" that keeps modernism and popular culture wholly separate, without acknowledging the cultural negotiations of those who, like Seldes, were steeped in both (Hammill *Women, Celebrity* 10). On the contrary, Seldes's essays of cultural criticism provide prime examples of middlebrow reading as mediation. In a *Vanity Fair* article that North would have inevitably come across while "reading 1922," Seldes praises the "damned effrontery," from the highbrow perspective, of inexhaustible popular artists who can reliably turn new tricks despite their tired forms. He praises George Herriman for his ability to make *Krazy Kat* both formulaic and spontaneous, and then he falls into a long

encomium to the Vaudeville performer Joe Cook. Seldes reads spectacular talent in the way Cook manages to make his performances feel fresh by burlesquing Vaudeville forms as he performs them. The essay lauds artists and writers who encourage middlebrow reading by playing simultaneously in the registers of high and low, experimenting with form and genre even while entertaining the masses. And Seldes himself, as a middlebrow reader, is capable of both enjoying and finding critical potential in the things he reviews, condemning those who view popular art as mere entertainment: "Weak-minded intellectuals," he accuses, "have always yearned for the abysmal, the vulgar, the primitive; alert ones have frequently found or tried to find in the commoner expressions of the artistic impulse some relief from the unmitigated tedium of the professionally second rate in the higher arts."

Seldes is not middlebrow because of the historical coincidence of his professional activities in 1922, or because he happened to like Vaudeville *and* Joyce—though that kind of eclecticism helps foster a middlebrow perspective. Seldes is a middlebrow because of the way that he can see various types of value in a text, simultaneously. His appreciation of Joe Cook's talents comes out of multiple value perspectives: he values Cook's professionalism, his ability to draw huge audiences night after night and thereby make a living in a worn-out profession; he values Cook for formal reasons, for his ability to understand and transform the genre in which he performs; and he values Cook because he makes him laugh. For Seldes, market value, aesthetic value, formal value, and *plaisir* commingle in a discursive negotiation. Middlebrow readers mediate the dialectics of cultural formation, understanding the value of both sides in those well-established battles between passive entertainment and active engagement, commerce and art, tradition and

avant-garde. Whether or not they subscribe to the influence of critical mediation—another well-rehearsed cultural debate—middlebrow readers are themselves mediators.

In conducting its mediation, middlebrow reading not only understands diverse value perspectives but also redistributes value by pairing dialectical terms with each other to deconstruct essentialized binaries. Beth Driscoll stumbles into this middlebrow operation with the contradictions inherent amongst several of her assertions about middlebrow culture. She writes, for example, that the middlebrow is "reverential," that a "veneration for elite culture underpins all of the activities of the literary middlebrow" (25). However, Driscoll also reasons that the middlebrow is "commercial": "For all its reverence towards high art, middlebrow culture is also thoroughly implicated in commercial distribution networks" (23). Driscoll writes as if commercialism and reverence for high art are characteristics at odds with each other in her definition of the middlebrow. In fact, these characteristics work together in the middlebrow's power to situate itself at the center of debates over cultural value. As Faye Hammill argues, what may look like reverence from a highbrow position—like a social climbing aspiration to "lay claim" to high art forms—is actually an intervention into the way that high art is understood. The middlebrow reader may be reverent in her respect for the aesthetic value of a modernist text, for example, but she's also irreverent in her willingness (obligation, even) to hold that aesthetic value equal to the commercial value of Erle Stanley Gardner's formulaic crime stories or the emotional value of John Galsworthy's novels.

Critics of middlebrow cultures often condemn it for overvaluing commercial success or sentimentality but middlebrow mediation merely allows these values to play fairly on the field of cultural discourse where certain aesthetic standards often receive a

handicap. Driscoll claims, for example that, "middlebrow reading practices emphasize emotional connections with literary works" (24). It's true that middlebrow readers often identify personally with characters and situations but middlebrow readers don't have a monopoly on empathy; what makes middlebrow culture seem particularly invested in emotion and earnestness is the way it allows those characteristics to have value in cultural debates, while academic discourse tends to disregard them as cliché, useless, or, worse, problematic. Jaime Harker, for example, places emotional attachment at the center of middlebrow aesthetics, asserting a "symbiotic relationship" among a middlebrow reader, writer, and text: "Middlebrow writers appealed to their readers' positive emotions—pity, love, patriotism, self-sacrifice, devotion. They focused their craft on creating the style, plot, characters, and themes that would satisfy the desires of their middle-class audience—not only for characters with whom to identify, but for narratives that would help them to understand modern life" (20). For the writers that Harker examines—Dorothy Canfield, Jessie Fauset, Pearl Buck, and Josephine Herbst—the craft of creating emotional identification comes as part of their Deweyan pragmatic political agendas. These writers seek to stir their readers' emotions as a means for creating political motivation, rather than simply for the sake of feeling. She also contends that emotional engagement led to the eventual marginalization of these writers, as post-WWII political and aesthetic snobbery undermined what it saw as "prefab sentiment and clichés" in the writing of the 1930s. By reviving the emotional value of the four writers she profiles, Harker doesn't argue that emotion is the *only* value of their writing—quite the opposite, she concludes that emotional engagement works hand-in-hand with intellectual and political engagement.

Emotion doesn't necessarily have to be useful, a means to an end the way it is for Harker's writers, to be valuable in middlebrow culture. In fact, utility plays an important role in many of the cultural debates mediated by middlebrow culture: between autonomous art and commercial art, for example, or between decadence and progressivism, or between masculine reading and feminine reading. Beth Driscoll's final assertion about middlebrow culture is that it is embroiled in tropes of female reading: the middlebrow is "female, because it is often produced and disseminated and overwhelmingly consumed by women," and that it is feminized, because its association with female women "has led to the middlebrow being degraded in gendered terms" (29).[9] Erica Brown recognizes this derogatory feminization of certain reading practices not only in explicit studies of middlebrow reading—like Leavis, who credits the middlebrow demographic's decline in "critical intelligence" to the domination of women—but also in general critical observations of the interwar reading public. She describes how George Orwell, in a memoir essay called "Bookshop Memories," notes the particular kind of books that women purchased at the bookstore where he worked as a youth. "Men, it is clear, exercise discernment in choosing their reading matter; women do not. Orwell expected romance novels to be read only by the lower classes, but finds that women of different classes are united in their readership of both romances and average—middlebrow—novels" (Brown "Introduction"). What seems really at stake in Orwell's feminization of romance novels, and what he calls the "Galsworthy-and-water stuff," is a certain frivolity about reading, split along gender lines rather than class. Women read for

[9] It might be relevant to note here, as well—and perhaps readers of this chapter already have—that contemporary middlebrow studies, as a subset of both literary and historical study, is populated almost entirely by female scholars.

fun, for emotion, for entertainment; men read for edification. Men desire utility in their reading practices, but women waste time with reading. But thinking about the tropes of mass culture in terms of utility exposes the contradictions in Driscoll's catalog of middlebrow characteristics: the middlebrow is commercial (interested in commercial success, in creating financial utility) and feminized (frivolous, disinterested in intellectual utility or responsibility) and earnest (interested above all in responsibility and ethical utility) and emotional (apolitical and interested in individual affective utility). Middlebrow is *both* obsessed with the acquisition of all kinds of capital *and* entirely disinterested.

When viewed as the ability to negotiate multiple, and often competing, value perspectives, middlebrow culture is important not because it's mediat*ed*, but because it is itself a form of mediation. Middlebrow culture stands in the tumultuous center of debates over what's valuable and participates in all of them. This may be why it seems so natural for critics to use mediating institutions as stand-ins for middlebrow culture: the mediating work done by the critics who ran (and still run) book clubs, or write reviews for magazines and newspapers, merely formalize the mediating work that middlebrow readers themselves do constantly.

**The Promise of an "Ultimate" Middle**

This sort of configuration of middlebrow culture, from a both/and logic of middleness, does admittedly rely on some post-structural conceptual gymnastics. Language itself makes it difficult for us to grasp the dialectical mediation that middlebrow culture performs—but the paradox of substance in language also gives us a

glimpse of its promise. Kenneth Burke suggests that, in order for the dialectic order to function, a third type of meaning—which he calls the "ultimate"—must exist to organize "the parliamentary wrangle," the oppositional tendencies of dialectical terms (Burke *Rhetoric* 189). An ultimate term is a "principle of principles" that organizes the dialectic order by providing "a 'guiding idea' or 'unitary principle' behind the diversity of voices" speaking dialectically (187). In the realm of dialectical semantics, where words require the illusion of binary logic in order to make meaning, the choices are either absolutism or compromise. When we define capitalism in contrast to socialism, for example, through the act of definition we either prioritize one system over the other or weaken them both to conceive a middle ground. Compromise, the seeming "middle" option, is part of the "standard parliamentary tactics," and always results in an attenuation of one side or the other in an argument (187). Each "spokesman" in an argument "must remain somewhat unconvinced by any solution which does not mean the complete triumphs of his partisan interests. Yet he may have to compromise, putting through some portion of his program by making concessions to allies whom, if he could get his wishes absolutely, he would repudiate" (187). The concept of ultimate terms provides the potential for a kind of middleness that extends beyond compromise. If we allow "middlebrow" to be a dialectical term, it too becomes either an absolute—one more argument about culture, which blinds itself to the values of other arguments—or a compromise—a watery version of its alternatives. We can see both of these rhetorical directions in the various disparaging definitions of middlebrow culture: for Leavis, the middlebrow is an absolute, a new demographic gaining terrifying prominence through the standardization of taste; for Woolf, it's a compromise, threatening to weaken the binary values of art and life. The

potential of the "ultimate," however, allows us to conceive a semantic space where we can organize, understand, enjoy multiple conflicting arguments without weakening any of the principles involved. If we move "middlebrow" into this semantic arena, we can flip cultural hierarchies sideways, making the middle a higher ground from which one can, as Priestley put it, gain "an appreciation of the human scene" (169), viewing and organizing the competing discourses of culture.

Burke's "ultimate" cannot provide the final solution to the problem of middleness, because it has itself some issues with slipperiness—but it allows us glimpses into the potential power of the middle. Burke explains that he had initially thought to call this third semantic realm "the mystical"—and his discussion of ultimate terms certainly foreshadows his discussion of the supernatural in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. The way that Burke talks about the ultimate betrays the difficulty he has with pinning it down. He uses the preposition "behind" to locate the ultimate, which creates a metaphorical image of something operating on the far side of a screen of realism, like the Wizard of Oz pulling levers behind his curtain. Herein lies the slipperiness of ultimate terms: Burke writes that "the ultimate provides a glimpse into a possible alternative, whereby a somewhat formless parliamentary wrangle [of dialectical terms] can…be creatively endowed with design" (188). But like the hand of God, the ultimate realm of language is understandable only as a glimpse. Language itself operates dialectically—signifiers gain meaning through comparisons to other signifiers—and so any actual word that we believe to be an ultimate term eventually reveals itself as merely dialectical. And yet, the arbitrariness of dialectical terms suggests that the ultimate—some province of language beyond, or "behind" dialectic, from which one can understand that arbitrariness—must

exist, and its existence promises an escape from the trap of binary logic. As with so many post-structural concepts, we can't simply say that the middlebrow *is* an ultimate term without subjecting ourselves to self-defeating slipperiness. But we can catch glimpses of how middlebrow culture, through its critical practices, aspires to the potential of the ultimate—to the ability to mediate contrary cultural discourses without merely compromising them.

## CHAPTER III

## NEGOTIATING A *FAIR* MARKET VALUE: READING THE IRONY OF *VANITY FAIR* LIKE A MIDDLEBROW

The April 1919 issue of *Vanity Fair* features a book review that seems at first, as *Vanity Fair* articles often do, playful and innocuous. The author, Robert Benchley, explains that *Vanity Fair* would like to keep pace with the trend of book-of-the-month articles popping up in magazines like *The North American Review*, but would prefer to not stoop to the pandering game of selecting bests. Rather, *Vanity Fair* will select "The Dullest Book of the Month" in order to save its readers from the burden of slogging through some tedious tome that, "it is safe to bet, a majority of [them] would not otherwise be conversant with" (Benchley 39). Benchley's first nominee for "the crown of deadly nightshade" is Thorstein Veblen's already twenty year-old economic treatise, *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* On the surface, Benchley appears to argue that this well-known work of sociology is both too tiresome and too pedestrian to warrant his readers' attention, but he goes about his task in a rather contradictory fashion, devoting fifteen hundred words to an analysis that quotes the text at length.

Deeper reading, though, exposes a second motive for the article. Benchley mentions, in what feels like an aside, that he has chosen the book in part because of protests from the Junior League of New York over Veblen's pending establishment (along with Charles Beard and John Dewey) of the New School of Social Research.[10]

[10]Veblen's New School of Social Research is now The New School University, located in downtown Manhattan. Early plans for The New School of Social Research happened to coincide with the Junior League of New York's decision to institute a training course requirement for membership, leading some to whisper that the course would be conducted at the new progressive college. A small faction of Junior

Benchley empathizes with the upright ladies of the Junior League, who certainly should be offended at a book that offers, in plodding prose, such a "gross attack upon their admirable and energetic League" (39). With that alliance in place, Benchley dives into his review, paraphrasing each chapter of *Leisure Class* as if it were an action novel full of debauchery and bravado, and poking fun at Veblen's self-serious syntax. Of Veblen's first chapter, for example, Benchley writes:

> We are introduced, without further ado, into the swirl of passion in which the book itself is carried along. Note the emergence of the love interest in the following vivid, if somewhat colloquial passage: "The ground on which a discrimination between facts is habitually made, changes as the interest from which the facts are habitually viewed changes. Those features of the facts at hand are salient and substantial upon which the dominant interest of the time throws its light." It will be seen from this that Dr. Veblen knows his Ring Lardner. The influence of the "You-know-me-Al" school has crept into this work almost imperceptibly and yet indubitably. (39)

Benchley's mock comparison of Veblen to Lardner spurs the reader to work back through the article and re-consider the seriousness of all of Benchley's positions. While pretending to sympathize with the misgivings of "New York's exclusive *demoiselles,*" he instead demonstrates the ignorance of their position: the matrons of the leisure class protesting the author of an important critique against social stratification. Although Benchley nominates Veblen for "the Crown of Deadly Nightshade" and positions himself

---

Leaguers protested the radical political leanings of the founding faculty and loudly voiced "the fear that members might have to attend lectures upon socialism and other radical doctrines." The Junior League officers quickly responded that they were in the process of setting up the training course at Barnard College. See "Junior League Official."

as far too interesting to take the book seriously, the review makes clear that he's read the entire thing carefully and critically—in contrast to the Junior Leaguers. Veblen's writing style proves to be merely collateral damage: Benchley's real victims are those who make value judgments before taking time to understand what they're evaluating. Benchley's ironic tone sets up his ideal reader as someone who's conversant with both Veblen and Lardner. If we've read both authors and can trade on the stylistic differences between the two, we not only get Benchley's jokes about Veblen but can sneer together at the hypocrisy of the Junior League's protest.

The brand of ironic layering that Benchley pulls off in this article was an important characteristic of the writing in *Vanity Fair* throughout its two-decade run, and particularly at the height of its popularity in the early 1920s. Much of the recent scholarship about the magazine chalks that ironic mode up to a broader quality of pretension that *Vanity Fair* and other "smart" magazines of its period relied upon to set themselves apart in a quickly crowding magazine market; to use Faye Hammill's terms, "the whole success of magazines like *Vanity Fair* depended on the operation of pretension" (Hammill "In Good Company" 132). Hammill concurs with Jessica Burstein, who grounds the concept of pretension in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. Both quote the same paragraph from Bourdieu's *Distinction*, in which he theorizes pretension as the "demand" for constant innovation in the cultural marketplace. Cultural products progress through a trend life-cycle, in which they start out as new and exciting and then move into popularity. Those who wish to distinguish themselves and their taste, therefore, must constantly chase after the next new thing. That chase—the "scramble for distinction," as Burstein puts it (Burstein 234)—is what Bourdieu dubs "pretension." In his own words:

> Pretension, the recognition of distinction that is affirmed in the effort to possess it…inspires the acquisition…of the previously most distinctive properties. The demand that is generated by this dialectic [of distinction/popularization] is by definition inexhaustible since the dominated needs which constitute it must endlessly redefine themselves in terms of a distinction which always defines itself negatively in relation to them. (Bourdieu *Distinction* 251-2)

It's therefore much easier to maintain distinction through negation, by eschewing the bad rather than endorsing the good, since anything that's considered new and exciting today will be pedestrian tomorrow. It's appealing to see the usefulness of irony in the negating logic of pretension. Irony itself ostensibly works by way of cognitive negation: in order to understand the meaning of an ironic sentence, the reader must negate the literal (pedestrian) meaning.

This essay, however, looks at the irony in *Vanity Fair* from a somewhat different angle, pushing against simplistic conceptualizations of irony that focus on its creation of difference. Rather, the unrelenting irony in each issue of *Vanity Fair* uses a sense of community to engage its readers in a practice of middlebrow reading. That practice, in turn, encourages a middlebrow perspective that negotiates the various ways a cultural product can have value. Nothing is inherently valuable in the pages of *Vanity Fair*—not celebrity, not modernism, not even *Vanity Fair* itself. All forms of cultural production feed the magazine's sarcastic appetite to expose potential hypocrisy. And irony, I argue, is critical to how the magazine welcomes its readers to participate in the cultural discussions that each issue stages. Although *Vanity Fair*'s reliance on irony initially seems, as Faye Hammill and Jessica Burstein claim, merely an exercise of aloof

pretension, this essay examines the rhetorical operations of irony in *Vanity Fair* to understand it as a tool for welcoming its readers into discussions of cultural value.

**Not Born Smart**

To understand *how* people read *Vanity Fair*, it would be helpful to know *who* read *Vanity Fair*. Unfortunately, although we have data on circulation numbers, there exists no accounting of who actually purchased the magazine. Instead, we must look to how the magazine positioned itself, editorially and commercially, to understand who it addressed as its ideal reader. Luckily, market positioning obsessed Condé Nast as he was building his magazine empire in the first decades of the twentieth century. In her recent biography of Nast, Susan Ronald primarily attributes the magazine tycoon's success to his realization, as the advertising manager at *Collier's*, that there were two types of magazines: the general publication, and the "class publication" (Ronald 33). This latter type of magazine, Nast reflected in 1913, was distinct because it "looks for its circulation *only* from those having in common a certain characteristic marked enough to group them into a class. That common characteristic may be almost anything: religion, a particular line of business, a community of residence, common pursuit, or some common interest" (qtd Sumner 43). Inspired by Cyrus Curtis's business model for *The Saturday Evening Post*, magazine advertising in the early 1900s clung to a quantity model: keep the price low and content general enough to attract a large readership, which in turn will attract advertisers looking for the widest audience, which will in turn subsidize the low cover price. Nast maintained an adman's skepticism of mass market logic: a wide circulation actually meant a broader range of readership, and therefore no promise that readers could actually purchase the goods they saw advertised. A class publication, on the other hand,

could target its advertising by curating it alongside editorial content. "Not only would the magazine be valued for its articles and fashion, but its advertisements would be equally useful to readers" (Ronald 80). When Nast purchased *Vogue* in 1910, he saw in it an opportunity to create a publication more focused than any other on the market, one targeted specifically to middle- and upper-middle class women interested in fashion and in spending their disposable incomes. His instincts proved correct: by 1914, Nast had quadrupled *Vogue*'s circulation.

When Nast tried to replicate that business model with *Vanity Fair*, however, he ran into some trouble trying to find the exact right market niche. In the introduction to a retrospective of *Vanity Fair* articles, the *Saturday Evening Post* editor Cleveland Amory comments cleverly that "unlike the legendary gentleman of the old school who was very good at wars but not very good between wars, the lady who was *Vanity Fair* was not very good at wars and depressions, but between them, in the golden days of the twenties, she was very good indeed" (Amory 7). In material terms, Amory's tidy assertion isn't quite true: *Vanity Fair* did quite well during war-time, emerging on the eve of World War I and reaching its circulation peak of 90,000—a figure that would stay relatively constant throughout the 1920s—by the conclusion of the Paris Peace Conference (Hammill & Leick 180). But it certainly had a rocky start. In late 1913, Nast simultaneously purchased one of *Vogue*'s competitors, a fashion magazine called *Dress*, and a languishing theater review magazine that he liked simply for its title, *Vanity Fair*—a reference to the Thackeray novel but also, more delightfully, to the bazaar in the village of Vanity in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.[11] Nast merged the two publications into another women's

[11] According to Douglas, the magazine that Nast bought "had made an unsavory reputation for itself as a kind of Broadway roustabout…a kind of peekaboo magazine that, as Crowninshield himself observed, 'had

fashion magazine, which he hoped, as he wrote in the editorial for the second issue, in November 1913, would "come very close to being as good, as lively, as pictorially attractive, and as breezy as *The Sketch*, *The Tatler*, and similar London publications" ("In Vanity Fair" Nov 1913). Ostensibly the "class" for whom he was designing *Dress and Vanity Fair* was a demographic of female readers one intellectual notch above those who bought *Vogue*, interested in reading about fashion but also, as the first issue's cover page announced, the stage, society, sports, and the fine arts. The first handful of issues fell far short of his lofty goals, however, laden down with static fashion sketches, regular ads for the *Vogue* pattern service, and asinine articles with titles like "Audacious Hats for Spineless Attitudes" and "Fur, and Again Fur."

Unhappy with the first few issues, Nast turned to his friend Frank Crowninshield for advice. Crowninshield was working as the art editor for *Century Illustrated Monthly* and had just finished managing publicity for the Armory Show—he was Nast's link to the urbane, worldly reader he was targeting. Crowninshield was adamant that Nast jettison women's fashion from the magazine entirely and, instead, focus the magazine on "the things people talk about at parties—the arts, sports, theatre, humor, and so forth" (qtd Douglas 96; Amory 7). Pleased with this advice, Nast asked Crowninshield to take over as editor, which he did on the condition that he could also remove the word "Dress" from the magazine's title.[12] Crowninshield's first issue of the new, improved *Vanity Fair* came

never seen the inside of a club or a lady's house'" (95). Nast apparently bought the rights to the title for $3,000. There were, however, at least two other magazines with that title: an American humor magazine of some repute, which ran from 1859-63, and a fairly successful British weekly that ran from 1868-1914. The latter had something of the same character as Nast's *Vanity Fair*, and was known for its caricatures of British politicians.

[12] *Vanity Fair* continued to run articles on men's fashion in every issue, though. Crowninshield famously objected to this, claiming that "a gentleman knows how to dress," but Nast mandated it. See Douglas, 112. See also: Seebohm, Caroline, *The Man Who Was Vogue*, and Ford, Corey, *A Time for Laughter*.

out in March 1914. In the editorial for his first issue, Crowninshield laid out his mission statement for the magazine's reboot: "VANITY FAIR will strive always to tell the truth about life, and to tell it tolerantly and entertainingly" ("In Vanity Fair" Mar 1914). The content that follows this editorial displays a marked turn toward the irreverent, and infuses the language with which it treats even dull topics like fashion with newfound sparkle. An article about women's accessories, for example, declares in its subtitle that "By the Distinctive Detail in her Toilette You May Know the Woman Versed in the Sophistries of Dress." Guided now by Crowninshield's impeccable hand (and apparent love of internal rhymes), this issue begins to demonstrate the qualities for which *Vanity Fair* became known at its circulation peak in the 1920s: its blistering honesty, its tendency to delight in hypocrisy, and its playfulness with language.

*Vanity Fair* denuded of *Dress*, however, lacked the discernable market focus Nast had intended for it. It was no longer a fashion magazine but now part of more diffuse class of "smart" magazines. What exactly makes a magazine "smart" is as much at issue now as it was when Nast bought the *Vanity Fair*. In their brief essay on this family of magazines in the *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, Faye Hammill and Karen Leick associate *Vanity Fair* with *The American Mercury*, *The New Yorker*, and *Esquire*, explaining that the qualifier "smart" is interchangeable with the terms "quality," "slick," and "sophisticated" (Hammill and Leick 176). However, George H. Douglas, whose exploration of smart magazines stands alone as the only book-length treatment of the category, adamantly makes a distinction between smart magazines (he replaces *American Mercury* with its older sibling, *The Smart Set*, and adds *Life* to the mix) and slick magazines. Douglas disdainfully characterizes slicks as "moist and pallid"

publications that made "strong appeals to snobbery, manufactured taste, and conspicuous consumption," fit less for reading than for artful arranging on a coffee table (4, 3). Smart magazines, according to Douglas, contained an unmatched vitality that they owed primarily to the clever writers who seemed to circulate among them: Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, Robert Sherwood, Heywood Broun, Edmund Wilson, Alexander Woollcott, P. G. Wodehouse—to name a notable few. These writers were not yet notable, however, when they began their careers at *Vanity Fair*, and so looking at the names in the table of contents provides us with a merely retrospective understanding of what constituted a "smart" magazine or its intended readership.

Likely prodded by Nast, Crowninshield himself attempts to define the class of his readers on his editorial page throughout early 1914. In the issues under Nast's direction, the editorial page contained a narrative of the issue's contents, justified by a declaration of the magazine's overarching goals. Those editorials were often apologetic for the issue's seemingly haphazard mixture of articles, and solicited advice about how to make the magazine appealing. In the April 1914 issue, the second edited by Crowninshield, that diffident editorial voice gives way to a wry, gentlemanly voice, one that pitches the magazine's eclectic contents as an editorial strategy to appeal to the ideal reader. The page begins with a question pressed assertively (and ungrammatically, as Crowninshield twice indicates) upon the editor by his friend "Alice": "Who are you editing Vanity Fair for, anyway?...if it is for men, then *why* those flouncy and flummery fashions? Is it for women? Then why so many articles on dogs and golf and motor cars?" ("In Vanity Fair" Apr 1914). Flummoxed at first by Alice's "harangue," the editor mulls her questions, in the style of a true gentleman, over dinner at the Sanctuary Club. He then responds to

Alice in a long letter, in which he informs her that the ideal *Vanity Fair* reader is, indeed, her: an "ardent American" who enjoys life and leisure and isn't afraid to speak her own mind. Alice provides our first glimpse into Crowninshield's ideal "smart" reader not as a merely modish consumer but as a persistently evaluative one. Despite her license with grammatical phrasing, Alice is smart enough to question the value of the magazine, trained enough as a critical reader to see through the magazine's textuality and wonder after its material aims. And Crowninshield rewards Alice for her savvy reading by welcoming her into his readership: he concludes his editorial by gifting her, as a wedding present, "Something that you will often need in life, and that will ever stand ready to comfort and enliven you…a free subscription to Vanity Fair."

**Playing the Middle Against Both Sides**

What exactly Crowninshield sees in Alice, as his ideal reader, comes into sharper focus when we examine the editorial and commercial choices *Vanity Fair* made as it gained market momentum through the close of the 1910s. Faye Hammill has been the first scholar to call out these choices for their relentless middleness: *Vanity Fair* has a way of falling, often obstinately, in between the extremes of the developing twentieth-century print market, "located between the author-centered production model of the avant-garde magazines and the market-driven arena of the daily papers and mass-circulation weeklies" ("In Good Company" 128). Richard Ohmann's work on the magazine boom that began in the last decade of the nineteenth century contextualizes these choices in a shifting discourse on cultural boundaries that occurred as industrialization remade the entire social fabric of the U.S. During this period, as

Ohmann narrates, the "urban elites" were attempting to draw "class lines around spaces and activities perceived as cultural…They fixed boundaries between art and entertainment, culture and spectacle, philanthropy and commerce" (Ohman 220). However, innovations in print technology and advertising, and increases in leisure and literacy, and the development of what Ohmann calls the "professional managerial class" all contributed to dismantle and rearrange those cultural boundaries. Ohmann explores how magazines helped readers to "fix their bearings in the fluid social space of the moment," and subsequent scholars have built on his work to describe the ways that magazines helped new types of social categories through the interplay of editorial and commercial content. Ann Ardis asserts, for example, that in its early years the NAACP's *Crisis* "both participated in and helped to create a black counter-public sphere in which consumer culture sustained rather than undermined educational ideals" (Ardis 25). Ellen Gruber Garvey argues, more generally, that advertising-reliant women's magazines used fiction to "flatter women readers' power as shoppers," and create environments in which women could feel comfortable in their role as consumer (Gruber Garvey 15). These studies all elaborate how, through both editorial content and advertising (or in the often-grey space between the two), many magazines remapped the social terrain of the early twentieth century, encircling their readers within social spaces organized around certain value perspectives: "pure" artistic value, commercial value, educational value, civic value etc.

*Vanity Fair,* by contrast, uses the "fluid social space" of the period as its playground. Priding itself on its eclectic editorial style and nonchalance toward advertisers, *Vanity Fair* places itself in the middle of the cultural flurry, negotiating value

systems and the social boundaries they create. Nast's success with *Vogue* further entrenched one commercial strategy of turn-of-the-century magazines, to cultivate boundaries between men's pastimes and women's, and appeal to specifically gendered interests. The obvious parents of this strategy were Cyrus Curtis's circulation juggernauts, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. Helen Damon-Moore has asserted that that, while the metaphor of gendered "separate spheres" cannot fully account for the complexity of the magazine market during this period, "the very creation of [those two magazines] rested on the assumption that women and men have separate interests that can be packaged in separate commercial magazines" (5). Under Crowninshield's editorship, though, *Vanity Fair* negotiates those gendered interests that divided the print market.

Rather than appeal to either men's or women's interests, or some vague intersection between them, *Vanity Fair* packages itself explicitly as both a men's magazine *and* a women's magazine—the result being that scholars, echoing Alice's ungrammatical protest, still disagree on who *Vanity Fair* was *for.* George Douglas, on one hand, asserts that *Vanity Fair* is "a magazine to tempt the masculine fancy" (112), pointing out that it catered to men's tastes by offering columns on men's fashion and "beautiful, and tastefully suggestive portraits" of famous women (Douglas 113). Hammill and Leick disagree, reasoning that a large proportion of *Vanity Fair* writers were women (Hammill and Leick180). Terence Pepper finds further significance in the number of women photographers featured in the magazine (Pepper 12). Crowninshield took strides to ensure that his female readership would continue to feel addressed by the magazine, even as he shifted the editorial policy away from explicitly gendered content. The

editorial for his first issue admits that the magazine will begin to pay less attention to women's fashions but not to women themselves. Crowninshield congratulates himself, facetiously, for endeavoring in a "noble and missionary spirit" to "make frequent appeals to [women's] intellects" rather than merely to their fashion sense ("In Vanity Fair" Mar 1914). In a radical move for a magazine with commercial aspirations in 1914, [13] the editorial then proclaims, "We hereby announce ourselves as determined and bigoted feminists." Crowninshield continues, in his April editorial, to assure his ideal reader—still played by Alice—that *Vanity Fair* is for both her husband *and* her, because they both have the interests and "qualities which, in men and women alike, we deem wholly praiseworthy" ("In Vanity Fair" Apr 1914). What appears, to readers of any time period, as uncertainty about whether *Vanity Fair* was a "men's magazine" or a "women's magazine" was, rather, a conscious decision to cut across gendered divides in the print market, and to take a broader view on who can and should want to read about culture and entertainment.

Gender forms one important market boundary that *Vanity Fair* dances over, but not the only; the magazine also maintains an ambiguous position toward the class status of its readers. In response to his parable about Alice, Crowninshield received enough letters from readers that he devoted his next month's editorial to consoling those who felt that upper-crust Alice and her husband didn't represent the interests of the magazine's real readers. "We are not a snob!" the editorial exclaims, and addresses its detractors: "It appears that our policy of editing is not sufficiently broad. Certain critics have even gone

[13] Nancy F. Cott points out, in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (1987), that by March 1914—a year after 8,000 suffragettes marched on Washington, D.C. ahead of Wilson's inauguration—the word "feminism" had become a household term but was largely undefined and contained some shock value. Even progressive magazines, like *The Nation,* were publishing articles with anti-feminist rhetoric (13-14).

so far as to claim that we are editing *Vanity Fair* for the little handful of people who spend March on the Riviera, buy their dresses in Paris, send their boys to Eton, play golf at Biarritz, pass August at Newport and order their caviar in crates" ("In Vanity Fair" May 1914). Indeed, browsing through the issue's Table of Contents, it's easy to assume that *Vanity Fair*'s ideal readers have endless leisure time to spend contemplating bridge strategy and flitting between Broadway theaters.

That assumption, however, ignores the commercial side of the magazine. Gruber Garvey's influential work on the relationship between magazines and consumer culture begins by reminding us that the very word "magazine" comes from the French word *magasin*, for store, and that the magazine boom of the 1890s coincided with the establishment of several large, ornate department stores (or *grand magasins*) like Harrod's, Macy's, and *Galleries Lafayette,* which inextricably linked leisure and commerce: "The *grand magasin* reframed the task of shopping as a luxurious and eminently pleasurable pursuit. Similarly, the magazine joined in one package, or booklet, the commercial world of goods and sales with the world of private musing and romantic fantasy" (3-4). *Vanity Fair* certainly was a commercial magazine, not above selling the trappings of the leisure class to anyone who aspired to it. After its second full year of publication, it held the title for most annual advertising lineage: 204,219 lines, more than 50,000 more than the runner-up (Douglas 101). In addition to its formal advertisements, each issue begins with several pages of "The Shops of Vanity Fair": columns of classified-style ads that promote finishing schools, dog-trainers, and vacation bungalows.[14] If you don't already live the high life, the ads telegraph, *Vanity Fair* is there

[14] Notably, during the first handful of issues, under Nast, this section of the magazine was called "The Shopping List." The title switch from something one *has* to do, as a chore, to a place one wants to go spend

to help you possess a piece of it. However, the advertising and the editorial content does not always cohere: the magazine's writers often poke fun at both middle-class poseurs and upper-class snoots. George Douglas asserts that the posh veneer of the magazine is only for "stylish effect": "*Vanity Fair* was neither of, for, nor by, members of the upper crust. Yes, there were a few top-hatted writers and artists in the early days…more often these were disaffected eccentrics, sardonic castaways, who wore their top hats at a cock-eyed angle" (Douglas 2). Those cocked top hats symbolize the ambivalent attitude *Vanity Fair* maintained toward its own commerciality, maintaining a material middle ground between the advertising-led editorial policies of mass-market magazines and the advertising-averse ones of avant-garde little magazines. Although its financial viability relied, to some extent, on its advertisers, *Vanity Fair* never took its commercial duties quite as seriously as larger magazines like *Munsey's* or *The Saturday Evening Post*.[15] This indifference toward any commercial *raison d'être* allowed *Vanity Fair* to address readers the same, whether they were dreaming of the leisured life or already living it. *Vanity Fair's* goal was simply to get readers to shop, to critically evaluate the wares in its pages, whether their intent was to buy or just browse.

The cultural content that *Vanity Fair* published amplified this agnostic relationship to commercial utility. As with its advertising, the eclecticism of the magazine's content encourages readers to shop its pages by weighing various types of cultural value, rather than simply buy what the magazine is pushing. *Vanity Fair* gives

---

time, rhetorically realigns the section with the role played by advertising throughout the rest of the magazine.

[15] According to Terence Pepper, Nast didn't worry much about making *Vanity Fair* self-sufficient (which likely contributed to the magazine's floundering after Nast lost much of his fortune in the 1929 stock market crash): "Nast's attachment to the title placed editorial excellence above all else and he was able to subsidize [*Vanity Fair*'s] high production values due to the financial success of his other periodicals" (19).

equal space to popular forms of culture as to avant-garde forms, and rarely distinguishes between the brilliance of celebrity and the brilliance of artistic genius. Its patronage of experimental writers and artists is well-remarked by both modernist scholars and magazine historians: Faye Hammill reasons that *Vanity Fair* published Gertrude Stein's writing as early as 1917 ("In Good Company" 126); Lawrence Rainey discusses how *Vanity Fair* was very nearly chosen to publish *The Waste Land* (Rainey 49-50); and Amory catalogs the modernist painters who "had their coming-out parties in print form" on the pages of *Vanity Fair*: "Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, Rouault, Epstein, Segonzac" (Amory 7).[16] The magazine, however, doesn't discriminate between these cultural innovators and more established, traditional intellectuals—or even celebrities of distinctively different types of notoriety. In nearly every issue of *Vanity Fair*, we can flip from a profile of an avant-garde artist on one page, to a review praising a Vaudeville act on the next, to a high-art photo of a film star after that. Hammill writes that "Crowninshield carefully balanced aesthetic against commercial considerations rather than understanding them as mutually exclusive," and she finds the most interesting quality of the *Vanity Fair* to be the way it makes "new meanings" from "the juxtaposition of culturally disparate texts and images" ("Good Company" 127). By refusing to discriminate between types of celebrity, she argues, *Vanity Fair* "provides a middle space, located between the author-centered production model of the avant-garde magazines and the market-driven arena of the daily papers and mass-circulation weeklies" (128). The editorial eclecticism that seems initially desultory to Alice in April

[16] See also Michael Murphy, "One Hundred Percent Bohemia"; Edward Bishop, "Re:Covering Modernism: Format and Function in the Little Magazines"; Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and Celebrity*; Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity*; David Earle, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form*.

1914 rather creates a unique middle space for *Vanity Fair* to occupy in the magazine market, a space that it creates for itself by juxtaposing content—advertising as well as editorial—that represents seemingly conflicting cultural positions and inviting its readers to come browse its wares.

**A Tour Through the Marketplace: April 1922**

As the period of New Modernist Studies stretches into its third decade,[17] and its attendant interest in the materiality of cultural production becomes a methodological commonplace, it is no longer radical to recognize that the lines between art and commerce were never as stark as past modernist scholars (and many modernists, themselves) would lead us to believe. Different magazines of the modernist period, however, adopted editorial practices that transmitted to their readers different perspectives about the value of art. Ellen Gruber Garvey describes, for example, the reciprocal relationship between the fiction and the advertising in early women's magazines: stories that featured female characters as empowered shoppers set up a beneficial environment for advertisers. At the same time, ads "naturalized" the realist fiction popular at the turn of the century, which often featured "a universe of domestic minutiae, a densely described fictional middle-class world of finely calibrated, socially significant detail, in which objects through metonymy or synecdoche stand in for their owners" (14). Ads and fiction in these magazines, therefore, worked together to augment commodified value. By contrast to Gruber Garvey's portrait of symbiosis between advertisers and editors of mass-market magazines, scholars of modernist little magazines

[17] As demarcated, according to Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, by the "invention" of the Modernist Studies Association in 1999. See "The New Modernist Studies," *PMLA*, 123.3 (May 2008).

often speak of editors who only begrudgingly pursued advertising. And even when scholars do want to draw attention to the importance of advertising in little magazines, they still tend to fall back on a vocabulary of purity and sin, as Robert Scholes does when he writes that "Ezra Pound could never come to terms with the economic side of modern culture. Other modernists were less pure in their faith, more willing to compromise with advertising, without allowing it to dominate them completely" (Scholes 225).

*Vanity Fair* occupies a middle position on the spectrum between mass-market and little magazines—but the "middle," as I've discussed previously, can take different forms. Faye Hammill's argument is clever for its recognition of the ways that *Vanity Fair* uses juxtaposition between different models of celebrity to "disrupt boundaries between high and low, commercial and artistic," values which become entrenched, over and over, in discussions about culture (Hammill *Women, Celebrity* 11). However, Hammill uses the terms "balance" and "negotiate" interchangeably to describe the operation of that disruption, ignoring that those two terms set up distinctly different models of middleness.[18] Balance means to maintain an equilibrium between things, to hold the weight of the two extremes equal. Balance requires a fulcrum, a centrist position between two dialectical extremes. Certainly, there is valor in serving as a balancing agent, anchoring two opposing viewpoints. But to describe the mechanism of the middlebrow as a balancer is to simplify cultural values into dialectical pairs and echo Virginia Woolf's evisceration of the middlebrow as "betwixt and between."[19] *Vanity Fair* was decidedly

[18] In her book *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture*, Hammill writes that, in editing *Vanity Fair*, Crowninshield "had to *negotiate between* aesthetic principles and commercial considerations" (12 emphasis mine). When she revised part of her book's introduction into an essay for the *Modernist Star Maps* collection (which I've quoted above), she changed the verb phrase in this sentence to "carefully balance."

[19] As discussed chapter I, Woolf's essay on the "Middlebrow," published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth*, famously used those terms to define the middlebrow: "But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And

never moderate nor ambivalent, nor did it reduce the complexity of cultural discourse to pairs of dialectical terms (unless doing so facetiously).

"Negotiate," instead, evokes the more complex, overlapping, both/and middleness of middlebrow culture, a middleness that abjures the dogmatic hierarchizing of culture by playing different cultural values against each other. A negotiation is a process of discussion among any number of varying positions, and the mediator in a negotiation presents and synthesizes the merits of each position. Whomever occupies the middle space in a negotiation must have an aptitude for understanding and representing diverse value perspectives simultaneously. Cleveland Amory suggests negotiation when he muses, in his aphoristic way, that *Vanity Fair* "seems, all in all and all at once, behind her time, ahead of her time, and yet, unmistakably, *of* her time" (Amory 7). That is, the magazine manages to maintain, all at the same time, a gentility that feels distinctly Victorian, a vivid interest in modern innovation, and an obsession with the trends of early twentieth-century consumer life. The middleness of *Vanity Fair*, indeed, "exposes the false logic that sets up straightforward oppositions" between cultural values, such as we see in the divisions between art and entertainment, say, or art and commerce (Hammill "In Good Company" 129). However, rather than flatten or neutralize those values by balancing them (which can be as much an act of domination as the establishment of cultural hierarchies), *Vanity Fair*'s negotiation of cultural values allows it to embody multiple value systems at the same time, putting those apparent cultural oppositions into

---

that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between…The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige."

dialog, sometimes subtly and sometimes more explicitly, and drawing its advertisements into a constant discussion about the value of things and ideas. As a result of this discussion, *Vanity Fair'*s advertising and editorial content blend together into a cultural marketplace, in which readers and critics alike use the currencies of art and commerce (and ethics and politics and sentiment) to barter for the value of cultural productions.

Any issue of *Vanity Fair* chosen at random could provide a perfect case study to analyze how the magazine sets up this cultural marketplace, but the April 1922 issue includes a few articles that make the marketplace particularly obvious. This issue, like every number of *Vanity Fair* from the 1920s, begins with approximately thirty pages of front-matter, comprising full-page advertisements, the "Shops of Vanity Fair," and a sprinkling of short articles about current cultural and financial events. From the first page, both ads and articles compete with each other to define value in different ways. The American Radiator Company ad on the back of the cover page claims that its product is valuable because it provides "beauty and perfect warmth" ("The Limousine of the Cellar"), while the Tiffany & Co ad on the adjacent page, with its adamantly sparse design, abjures warmth and beauty in favor of value defined as "quality" and "tradition" ("Tiffany & Co"). Adjacency does not provide the only means of dialog for the ads; the copy for similar products appeal to different definitions of value in order to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Maxwell cars are "astonishing and conspicuous," while Paige makes "The Most Beautiful Car in America" and the Chandler Six offers durability at a "modest cost" ("The Good Maxwell," "The Most Beautiful Car in America," "Welcome In Exclusive"). Lissue Handkerchiefs also boast of durability, while the silk four-in-hand scarves from H. C. Cohn & Co are notable for evoking "the

misty, morning tints of the English countryside in quaint old Surrey" ("Lissue Handkerchiefs," "Silken Sunshine"). Placed side-by-side, these advertisements form the print version of a market bazaar, each page competing to convince a casual reader to linger on the page and buy into (literally) their version of value.

A consumer marketplace set up by advertisements is unsurprising in a commercial magazine, but the editorial content of *Vanity Fair* echoes that literal market with a marketplace of culture, in which cultural productions are constantly valued and re-valued. The April 1922 issue makes this cultural marketplace explicit in an article entitled "The New Order of Critical Values" (Figure 6, next page). The majority of the space in this double-page spread is occupied by a chart that lists alphabetically nearly 200 writers, artists, musicians and philosophers, from Abelard and Franklin P. Adams to William Butler Yeats and "Flo" Ziegfeld. Next to each name is a series of numbers in columns. The opening description claims that "a great Transvaluation of Values, to use a Nietzschean phrase, has recently taken place in America," and offers the chart as "a sort of logarithm table by which the views of [ten cultural critics of the younger generation] may be ascertained on almost any subject" (40). *Vanity Fair'*s own Heywood Broun and Edmund Wilson are included in the ten, as are Gilbert Seldes and Henry McBride from *The Dial*, and Mencken and Nathan from *The Smart Set*. For each entry in the chart the ten critics have each provided a score from negative twenty-five to positive twenty-five, with zero as neutral, to quantify each entity's "absolute value—in the critic's own scheme of things" (40). The final column of the chart provides an average of the ten quantified opinions for each entry, a "composite picture of the new critical mind, as a whole." The result is a kind of exchange chart for cultural icons—and, it's assumed, their attendant

**Figure 6.** "The New Order of Critical Values," *Vanity Fair*, April 1922.



# The New Order of Critical Values

*In Which Ten of the Modern Critics of America Are Allowed to Substitute New Laurels for Old*

A GREAT Transvaluation of Values, to use the Nietzschean phrase, has recently taken place in America. A new set of Critics has arisen to take the place of the old: in Poetry, Mr. Untermeyer's gang of pirates has scuttled Stedman's Anthology; in ideas, The New Republic and The Freeman have eclipsed the Atlantic Monthly of W. D. Howells; in music and painting the tranquil stream of our native talent has been disturbed by such astounding foreign bodies as Ornstein and Picabia.

It is the purpose of this page to orient the American public among the newer critical standards. The chart presents an abstract of the opinions of ten of our younger critics, and, also, a composite picture of the new critical mind, as a whole. It is, in fact, intended as a sort of logarithm table by which the views of these celebrated authorities may be ascertained on almost any subject.

The subjects to be criticized have been chosen with a view to covering the whole field of life and thought, and the critics have been requested to assign to each of them its absolute value—in the critic's own scheme of things. The names are marked on a scale ranging between plus 25 and minus 25, the former signifying the most complete approval, and the latter, utter condemnation. A zero mark means that the critic feels, in this connection, either complete indifference or else lack of familiarity with the subject.

There is a word on the critics on the opposite page.

| | BROUN | McBRIDE | MENCKEN | NATHAN | RASCOE | ROS'FELD | SELDES | TAYLOR | WILSON | WRIGHT | AVERAGE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abelard | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 10 | 1 | 15 | 6 | 4.0 |
| Franklin P. Adams | 5 | 0 | 15 | 5 | 1 | -25 | 0 | 16 | 2 | -10 | .9 |
| Henry Adams | 0 | 25 | 20 | 0 | 25 | 10 | 10 | 11 | 6 | 0 | 10.7 |
| Aeschylus | 0 | 20 | 20 | 12 | 25 | 24 | 12 | 21 | 20 | 0 | 15.4 |
| Sherwood Anderson | 11 | 10 | 15 | 8 | 25 | 10 | 14 | 10 | 10 | 4 | 11.7 |
| Aristotle | 0 | -5 | 25 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 21 | 20 | 25 | 21 | 16.7 |
| Saint Augustine | 0 | 0 | -20 | -5 | 2 | 15 | 1 | 17 | -10 | 0 | 0 |
| Bach | 0 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 24 | 25 | 22 | 24 | 25 | 25 | 22.0 |
| Leon Bakst | 12 | -6 | 2 | 1 | -25 | 1 | 4 | 15 | 1 | -18 | -1.3 |
| Theda Bara | -5 | 3 | 15 | 1 | 0 | 1 | -2 | -19 | -2 | -25 | -3.3 |
| Henri Barbusse | 8 | -4 | 0 | -14 | 0 | 13 | -5 | 19 | 5 | 1 | 2.3 |
| George Gray Barnard | 0 | 18 | 0 | 2 | -25 | -9 | 1 | 17 | 0 | 1 | .5 |
| John Barrymore | 10 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | -5 | -12 | 1 | 1 | -.2 |
| Beethoven | 0 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 24 | 19 | 0 | 22 | 25 | 25 | 19.0 |
| George Bellows | 9 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 10 | -1 | 0 | 12 | 1 | -12 | 2.2 |
| Irving Berlin | 4 | 0 | 10 | 7 | 22 | 1 | 18 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 7.2 |
| Saint Bernard | 0 | 0 | 0 | -25 | 0 | 11 | 0 | 18 | -25 | 0 | -2.1 |
| Maxwell Bodenheim | 0 | 1 | 0 | -25 | 25 | 3 | 5 | 0 | -2 | 0 | -.7 |
| Brahms | 0 | 6 | 25 | 23 | 25 | 13 | 2 | 21 | 15 | 23 | 15.3 |
| Fanny Brice | 3 | 0 | 10 | 2 | 25 | 1 | 17 | 16 | 1 | -25 | 5.0 |
| Briggs | 7 | -25 | 10 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 17 | 0 | 1 | 2.0 |
| Robert Browning | 2 | -11 | 2 | 3 | 15 | 17 | 2 | 25 | 12 | -12 | 5.5 |
| W. J. Bryan | 9 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 0 | -20 | -16 | -10 | -15 | -25 | -12.7 |
| Nicholas Murray Butler | -10 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 0 | -25 | -20 | -23 | -23 | -25 | -17.6 |
| James Branch Cabell | 10 | -5 | 20 | 17 | 25 | -13 | -17 | 23 | 2 | -13 | 4.9 |
| John Alden Carpenter | 0 | 3 | -20 | 1 | 5 | -3 | 3 | 18 | 1 | 0 | .8 |
| Georges Carpentier | 7 | 5 | -20 | -20 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 6 | -15 | 0 | -3.6 |
| Catullus | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 20 | 14 | 8 | 1 | 25 | 12 | 8.3 |
| Cèzanne | 0 | 25 | 5 | 2 | 25 | 25 | 17 | 18 | 15 | 25 | 15.7 |
| Charlie Chaplin | 18 | 25 | 10 | 6 | 25 | 3 | 25 | 25 | 10 | 25 | 17.2 |
| Robert W. Chambers | -5 | -25 | -20 | -25 | 0 | -17 | 10 | -10 | -25 | -25 | -14.2 |
| G. K. Chesterton | 6 | -24 | -10 | 1 | 0 | -5 | 1 | 10 | 10 | -22 | -3.3 |
| Howard Chandler Christy | -5 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 0 | -19 | -20 | -13 | -25 | 0 | -13.2 |
| Cicero | 0 | 20 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 | -10 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 2.5 |
| Joseph Conrad | 17 | -5 | 20 | 20 | 20 | -8 | 20 | 25 | 10 | 25 | 14.4 |
| James Fenimore Cooper | 2 | -15 | -20 | 0 | 0 | -2 | -1 | 9 | 0 | 1 | -2.6 |
| Frank Crane | -3 | -25 | 0 | -25 | 0 | -25 | -19 | -17 | -10 | -25 | -14.9 |
| Herbert Croly | -4 | -25 | 10 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 17 | 10 | 0 | 1.5 |
| Dante | 0 | 25 | -20 | 13 | 25 | 25 | 17 | 12 | 25 | -15 | 10.7 |
| De Valera | -20 | -10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | -12 | 20 | 3 | 1 | -1.7 |
| Coningsby Dawson | -21 | 0 | -25 | 0 | -25 | -25 | -25 | -22 | -25 | 0 | -16.8 |
| Claude Debussy | 8 | 2 | 18 | 2 | 20 | 13 | 16 | 23 | 10 | 7 | 11.9 |
| Floyd Dell | 9 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 1 | -10 | -15 | 8 | 1 | 2 | .1 |
| Jack Dempsey | 8 | 25 | 5 | 10 | 25 | 3 | 1 | 4 | -20 | 0 | 6.1 |
| Charles Dickens | 13 | 25 | 10 | 4 | 5 | 11 | 20 | 18 | 15 | -24 | 9.7 |
| John Dos Passos | 7 | 3 | 10 | 1 | 10 | 3 | 5 | 16 | 2 | 1 | 5.8 |
| Theodore Dreiser | 5 | 0 | 20 | 12 | 15 | 4 | 1 | 10 | 1 | 14 | 8.2 |
| Max Eastman | 6 | 0 | 10 | 2 | 0 | 2 | -2 | 10 | 1 | -15 | 1.4 |
| Professor Einstein | 0 | 4 | 10 | -10 | 3 | 15 | 10 | 19 | 20 | 14 | 8.5 |
| T. S. Eliot | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 25 | 4 | 17 | 11 | 7 | 0 | 6.4 |
| George Eliot | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 20 | -10 | 0 | 2.7 |
| Emerson | 6 | 25 | 10 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 4 | 10 | 16 | 8.8 |
| Jacob Epstein | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | -25 | 7 | 1 | 18 | 0 | 2 | .6 |
| Erasmus | 0 | 25 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 1 | 21 | 15 | 0 | 7.7 |
| Geraldine Farrar | 3 | 2 | 10 | 10 | 0 | -8 | -21 | 5 | -5 | -18 | -2.2 |
| Douglas Fairbanks | 6 | 25 | 5 | 0 | 0 | -9 | -20 | 8 | -5 | -10 | 0 |
| Elsie Ferguson | 1 | -25 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | -1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | -2 |
| Henry Fielding | 18 | 25 | 20 | 13 | 0 | 13 | 5 | 17 | 5 | 8 | 12.4 |
| Scott Fitzgerald | 5 | 0 | 8 | 10 | 7 | -2 | -20 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1.0 |
| Flaubert | 9 | 15 | 20 | 20 | 25 | 17 | 20 | 10 | 15 | 17 | 16.8 |
| Marshal Foch | 4 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -1 | -1 | 1 | 0 | 10 | 1.9 |
| William Z. Foster | 4 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 9 | 5 | 0 | 4.1 |
| Henry Ford | 8 | 25 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -25 | -22 | 17 | 0 | -25 | -2.2 |
| Anatole France | 21 | 25 | 20 | 20 | 25 | 5 | 22 | 21 | 20 | 12 | 19.1 |
| Saint Francis | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 25 | 25 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 0 | 11.0 |
| Benjamin Franklin | 6 | 20 | 12 | 0 | 10 | -11 | -22 | 10 | 10 | 2 | 3.7 |
| Frederick the Great | 1 | 10 | 25 | 24 | 0 | 5 | -15 | -10 | -5 | 15 | 5.0 |
| Sigmund Freud | 19 | 4 | 10 | 5 | 2 | 17 | 15 | 12 | 15 | -25 | 7.4 |
| Mary Garden | 8 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 25 | 4 | 16 | 14 | 1 | 15 | 8.6 |
| Judge Gary | -10 | 0 | -20 | 0 | 0 | -20 | -5 | -24 | -25 | 9 | -9.5 |
| Gilbert & Sullivan | 14 | 25 | 22 | 24 | 5 | 4 | 12 | 20 | 15 | 15 | 15.6 |
| Giorgione | 0 | 25 | 0 | 2 | 20 | 14 | 5 | 17 | 20 | 25 | 12.8 |
| Lillian Gish | 2 | 8 | 17 | 17 | 1 | -1 | -22 | 5 | 0 | -24 | .3 |
| Yvette Guilbert | 9 | 25 | 12 | 0 | 25 | 9 | 12 | 10 | 15 | 1 | 11.8 |
| Elinor Glyn | -15 | -25 | -25 | -17 | 0 | -6 | -1 | -11 | -3 | -25 | -12.8 |
| Goethe | 6 | 25 | 23 | 25 | 22 | 25 | 15 | 14 | 23 | 20 | 19.8 |
| Samuel Gompers | 5 | 0 | -25 | -25 | 0 | -24 | -4 | 0 | 0 | -25 | -9.8 |
| Francis Hackett | 8 | -12 | 12 | 10 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 2.9 |
| Warren G. Harding | 6 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 0 | -5 | 0 | 0 | -24 | 0 | -7.3 |
| Frank Harris | 11 | -25 | 15 | 15 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 3.6 |
| Hawthorne | 7 | 14 | 20 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 12 | 1 | -7 | 5.9 |
| Wm. R. Hearst | -20 | 4 | 20 | 21 | 20 | -20 | 11 | -25 | -25 | 10 | -.4 |
| James Huneker | 7 | 2 | 20 | 22 | 20 | 2 | -17 | 18 | 1 | 16 | 9.1 |
| Robert Henri | 0 | -17 | 0 | 0 | 11 | -2 | 0 | 18 | 1 | 15 | 2.6 |
| O. Henry | 11 | 20 | -20 | -16 | 1 | -4 | -15 | 4 | 1 | -25 | -4.3 |
| Homer | 0 | 20 | 20 | 16 | 25 | 25 | 14 | 13 | 20 | 4 | 15.7 |
| Arthur Hopkins | 3 | -19 | 5 | 13 | 0 | -10 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 1 | .1 |
| Charles E. Hughes | 7 | -24 | -25 | 0 | 0 | 1 | -5 | 11 | 0 | -21 | -5.6 |
| Victor Hugo | 11 | 14 | -10 | 2 | 10 | 11 | -5 | 19 | 1 | 15 | 6.8 |
| Huysmans | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 23 | 10 | -15 | 12 | 2 | 2 | 4.6 |
| Ibanez | 2 | -25 | -25 | -25 | 0 | -17 | -25 | -1 | 0 | -25 | -14.1 |
| Ibsen | 15 | 20 | 10 | 18 | 0 | 19 | 2 | 21 | 17 | 5 | 12.7 |
| Ingres | 0 | 25 | -20 | 0 | 0 | 18 | 7 | 15 | 15 | -1 | 5.9 |
| Henry James | 4 | 9 | 10 | 5 | 21 | 10 | 25 | 20 | 15 | 14 | 13.3 |
| William James | 8 | 11 | 15 | 4 | 10 | 9 | 1 | 17 | 10 | -15 | 7.0 |
| Thomas Jefferson | 17 | 0 | 10 | 12 | -15 | 4 | 5 | 10 | 10 | 12 | 6.5 |
| Maria Jeritza | 10 | 8 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 9 | 22 | 0 | 24 | 7.9 |
| Joan of Arc | 15 | 0 | 0 | -24 | 0 | 12 | 5 | 23 | 2 | 0 | 3.3 |
| Augustus John | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | -25 | 2 | -1 | 16 | 0 | -15 | -1.9 |
| Dr. Johnson | 16 | 25 | 5 | 7 | -25 | 11 | 16 | 16 | 2 | 3 | 7.6 |
| Al Jolson | 4 | 5 | 0 | 7 | -25 | 1 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1.2 |
| Robert Edmond Jones | 5 | -16 | 5 | 2 | 16 | 1 | 14 | 19 | 1 | 1 | 4.8 |
| James Joyce | 0 | 10 | 15 | 2 | 25 | 13 | 20 | 12 | 13 | 5 | 11.5 |
| Kant | 0 | 12 | 18 | 8 | 0 | 23 | -6 | 0 | 23 | 5 | 8.3 |
| Kipling | 19 | 6 | 20 | 6 | 0 | -8 | 0 | 15 | 1 | -1 | 5.8 |
| Krazy Kat | 2 | 0 | 0 | -25 | 25 | 0 | 23 | 24 | 2 | 25 | 7.6 |
| Ring Lardner | 16 | 6 | 10 | 10 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 10 | 2 | 13 | 7.9 |
| Stephen Leacock | 9 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 0 | -2 | -19 | 9 | -1 | 1 | -1.1 |
| Mlle. Lenglen | 4 | 2 | 0 | -25 | 0 | -24 | 0 | -4 | 0 | 0 | -4.7 |
| Lenin | 13 | 15 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 8 | 8 | 18 | 13 | -25 | 0 |

**Figure 6.** (continued)



| | BROUN | McBRIDE | MENCKEN | NATHAN | RASCOE | ROSFELD | SELDES | TAYLOR | WILSON | WRIGHT | AVERAGE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leonardo | 9 | 25 | 0 | 10 | 24 | 22 | 21 | 20 | 20 | 23 | 17.4 |
| Sinclair Lewis | 12 | 0 | 10 | 1 | 3 | 1 | -15 | 0 | 3 | -8 | .7 |
| Lloyd George | 10 | 5 | -25 | -1 | 0 | -20 | -17 | 0 | -25 | -20 | -9.3 |
| Henry Cabot Lodge | 2 | -22 | -25 | -11 | 0 | -23 | -17 | -20 | -25 | -20 | -16.1 |
| Amy Lowell | 7 | -11 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 12 | 8 | -23 | 8 | .7 |
| Ludendorff | 0 | 0 | 23 | 17 | 0 | 1 | 1 | -1 | -20 | 18 | 3.9 |
| George Luks | 0 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 13 | -2 | 1 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 3.5 |
| Luther | 9 | 0 | -25 | -16 | 0 | 23 | 0 | 20 | 15 | -25 | .1 |
| Edward MacDowell | 0 | 6 | 5 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 17 | 1 | 0 | 4.0 |
| Marilynn Miller | 7 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 1 | 2.0 |
| Bishop Manning | -15 | 0 | -25 | -7 | 0 | -25 | 0 | 9 | -25 | 0 | -8.8 |
| Paul Manship | 14 | -15 | 0 | 0 | 10 | -25 | -2 | 10 | 1 | -15 | -2.2 |
| Marcus Aurelius | 0 | 25 | 0 | 1 | -25 | 5 | -1 | 12 | 17 | 0 | 3.4 |
| John Masefield | 15 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 7 | -3 | -6 | 24 | 10 | 2 | 6.0 |
| Edgar Lee Masters | 13 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 2 | -7 | 18 | 2 | -20 | 2.6 |
| Matisse | 0 | 18 | 0 | 2 | 20 | 14 | 8 | 6 | 8 | 15 | 9.1 |
| Lorenzo de'Medici | 0 | 25 | 20 | 20 | 0 | 9 | 1 | 12 | 10 | 25 | 12.2 |
| H. L. Mencken | 7 | 8 | 5 | 0 | 20 | 1 | 5 | 17 | 10 | 12 | 8.5 |
| John Stuart Mill | 11 | 0 | 10 | 8 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 15 | 12 | 0 | 7.1 |
| Edna Millay | 12 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 17 | -1 | -10 | 21 | 10 | 2 | 5.3 |
| John Milton | 0 | 25 | 0 | 14 | -15 | 12 | 5 | 22 | 20 | -12 | 7.1 |
| George Moore | 10 | -9 | 15 | 12 | 21 | 10 | 10 | 5 | 2 | 18 | 9.4 |
| Marianne Moore | 0 | 0 | 0 | -22 | 10 | 3 | 4 | 0 | -2 | 0 | -.7 |
| Paul Elmer More | 0 | 0 | 10 | -17 | -25 | 3 | 2 | -10 | 2 | 0 | -3.5 |
| Eli Nadelman | 0 | 4 | 0 | -25 | -25 | 6 | 1 | 10 | 0 | 1 | -2.8 |
| George Jean Nathan | 2 | 7 | 0 | | 20 | -1 | 1 | 17 | 2 | 0 | 5.3 |
| Nietzsche | 5 | 25 | 25 | 13 | 25 | 21 | 25 | 20 | 10 | 21 | 19.0 |
| Lord Northcliffe | -6 | -3 | -25 | 4 | 0 | -20 | -13 | -4 | -25 | -25 | -11.7 |
| Eugene O'Neill | 8 | 4 | 10 | 15 | 10 | 1 | 6 | 15 | 1 | 8 | 7.8 |
| Walter Pater | 0 | 16 | 5 | 19 | 10 | 10 | 19 | 0 | 5 | -10 | 7.4 |
| Saint Paul | 0 | 25 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 1 | -25 | 2 | -25 | -.1 |
| Petrarch | 0 | 25 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 15 | 5 | 4 | 5.6 |
| Picasso | 0 | 13 | 0 | 1 | 20 | 18 | 19 | 0 | 4 | 20 | 9.5 |
| Mary Pickford | 5 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 1 | -1 | -17 | 8 | 0 | -18 | -1.4 |
| Plato | 7 | 25 | 25 | 5 | 18 | 25 | 3 | 25 | 25 | 7 | 16.5 |
| Ezra Pound | 0 | 4 | 10 | 2 | 20 | 4 | 16 | -10 | -10 | 5 | 4.1 |
| Praxiteles | 0 | 25 | 0 | 17 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 24 | 25 | 22 | 13.3 |
| Racine | 0 | 6 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 18 | 5 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 5.9 |
| Raphael | 0 | 25 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 18 | -4 | 20 | 12 | 8 | 9.4 |
| Renoir | 0 | 12 | 0 | 3 | 15 | 17 | 6 | 17 | 10 | 25 | 10.5 |
| James Whitcomb Riley | -10 | 0 | -20 | -15 | 0 | -1 | -20 | 7 | -1 | -24 | -8.4 |
| E. A. Robinson | 5 | 0 | 5 | -15 | 12 | 3 | 12 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 3.5 |
| Dr. Wm. Robinson | 6 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | -4 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 2.0 |
| Rodin | 20 | 16 | 10 | 20 | 10 | 6 | 9 | 25 | 15 | -25 | 10.6 |
| Theodore Roosevelt | 7 | 7 | -20 | -20 | 0 | -10 | -9 | 0 | -25 | -25 | -9.5 |
| Edmond Rostand | 18 | -20 | 2 | 18 | 2 | -15 | -18 | 9 | -10 | 0 | -1.4 |

| | BROUN | McBRIDE | MENCKEN | NATHAN | RASCOE | ROSFELD | SELDES | TAYLOR | WILSON | WRIGHT | AVERAGE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jean Jacques Rousseau | 6 | 25 | 10 | 6 | 0 | 15 | -15 | 12 | 12 | 10 | 8.1 |
| Ruskin | 4 | 10 | -10 | 7 | -25 | 6 | -16 | -8 | -4 | -25 | -6.1 |
| Bertrand Russell | 14 | 9 | -15 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 16 | 15 | 10 | 0 | 5.6 |
| Babe Ruth | 19 | 25 | -25 | -25 | 25 | 1 | -24 | 5 | -25 | -25 | -4.9 |
| Sappho | 0 | 0 | 0 | 25 | 25 | 6 | 7 | 23 | 25 | 7 | 11.8 |
| Arnold Schoenberg | 0 | 6 | 5 | -1 | 20 | -5 | 15 | -25 | 5 | 11 | 3.1 |
| Walter Scott | 6 | 6 | 0 | 1 | -25 | -4 | -17 | -20 | 1 | 2 | -5.8 |
| Shakespeare | 19 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 20 | 22 | 21 | 17 | 22.4 |
| George Bernard Shaw | 23 | 3 | 15 | 14 | -21 | 4 | 23 | 22 | 16 | -20 | 7.9 |
| Shelley | 5 | 25 | 0 | 14 | 17 | 18 | 11 | 10 | 16 | 7 | 12.3 |
| Clare Sheridan | 7 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 0 | -2 | -4 | 0 | -25 | 0 | -7.4 |
| John Siddall | -1 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 0 | 0 | -24 | -21 | -25 | -15 | -7.3 |
| Mr. Addison Sims of Seattle | -15 | 0 | 0 | -25 | 0 | 0 | -1 | -1 | -25 | 0 | -6.7 |
| Upton Sinclair | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | -6 | 2 | 1 | -22 | -1.8 |
| Sophocles | 0 | 25 | 0 | 8 | 18 | 20 | -16 | 22 | 23 | 16 | 11.6 |
| Stravinsky | 14 | 11 | 1 | 2 | 20 | 9 | 6 | 19 | 10 | -10 | 8.2 |
| John S. Sumner | -24 | 0 | -25 | 0 | -25 | -25 | -2 | -25 | -25 | -25 | -17.6 |
| Billy Sunday | -23 | 0 | -25 | -25 | -25 | -25 | -20 | -25 | -25 | -25 | -21.8 |
| Tagore | -2 | 0 | -20 | -20 | -25 | 2 | -5 | 9 | 1 | -25 | -8.5 |
| Sara Teasdale | 2 | 0 | 8 | 5 | -25 | -1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | -.6 |
| Tennyson | 4 | -2 | 10 | 10 | -25 | 5 | 4 | 16 | 10 | -12 | 2.0 |
| Titian | 0 | 25 | 0 | 3 | 10 | 19 | 5 | 0 | 15 | 25 | 11.6 |
| Tolstoi | 16 | 2 | -20 | 3 | 0 | 19 | 10 | 0 | 15 | -20 | 2.6 |
| New York Tribune | 4 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 0 | -25 | -5 | -14 | -25 | 0 | -11.5 |
| Unknown Soldier | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -25 | -25 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | -1.5 |
| Louis Untermeyer | 7 | -5 | 12 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 4.0 |
| Henry Van Dyke | 1 | -12 | -10 | -18 | -25 | -25 | -5 | -5 | -24 | -25 | -14.8 |
| Virgil | 0 | 10 | -10 | 8 | 6 | 12 | 5 | 5 | 20 | 4 | 6.0 |
| Voltaire | 13 | 25 | 25 | 8 | 3 | 20 | 21 | 21 | 20 | 8 | 16.4 |
| Richard Wagner | 11 | 20 | 25 | 20 | 15 | 19 | 18 | 25 | 18 | 10 | 18.1 |
| Hugh Walpole | 4 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 0 | -13 | -17 | 4 | -4 | -10 | -2.6 |
| John Wanamaker | 0 | 25 | -20 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 15 | -16 | 0 | .5 |
| George Washington | 13 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 5 | 0 | 21 | 8 | 18 | 16.5 |
| Frederick Watts | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -6 | -5 | 4 | -1 | -25 | -3.0 |
| John V. A. Weaver | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 1.9 |
| H. G. Wells | 19 | 0 | 20 | 10 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 23 | 10 | -17 | 7.8 |
| Edith Wharton | 8 | -15 | 5 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 5 | 15 | 15 | 5 | 5.5 |
| Whistler | 9 | 4 | 20 | 7 | 20 | 5 | 1 | 25 | 15 | -20 | 8.6 |
| Walt Whitman | 21 | 25 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 10 | 22 | 18 | -18 | 15.8 |
| Oscar Wilde | 11 | 15 | 5 | 16 | 5 | 4 | 16 | 20 | 3 | 10 | 10.5 |
| Woodrow Wilson | 4 | 25 | -25 | -20 | 0 | -20 | 0 | 20 | 12 | -25 | -2.9 |
| Wordsworth | 2 | 20 | 5 | 2 | -25 | 8 | 0 | -1 | 18 | -10 | 1.9 |
| Ed Wynn | 13 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 20 | 1 | 5 | 22 | 5 | 0 | 6.8 |
| William Butler Yeats | 2 | -10 | 10 | 2 | 15 | 4 | 22 | 17 | 25 | 3 | 9.0 |
| Flo Ziegfeld | 4 | 0 | 10 | 10 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 1 | 10 | 5.0 |

## The First and the Last, and Some of Those Who Tied

The table of values above shows the following results:

The fifteen highest are: Shakespeare 22.4, Bach 22, Goethe 19.8, Anatole France 19.1, Beethoven 19, Nietzsche 19, Wagner 18.1, Leonardo Da Vinci 17.4, Charlie Chaplin 17.2, Flaubert 16.8, Aristotle 16.7, Plato 16.5, George Washington 16.5, Voltaire 16.4, Walt Whitman 15.8.

The fifteen lowest are: Theodore Roosevelt -9.5, New York Tribune -11.5, Lord Northcliffe -11.7, W. J. Bryan -12.7, Elinor Glyn -12.8, Howard Chandler Christy -13.2, Ibanez -14.1, Robert W. Chambers -14.2, Henry Van Dyke -14.8, Frank Crane -14.9, Henry Cabot Lodge -16.1, Coningsby Dawson -16.8, Nicholas Murray Butler -17.6, John S. Sumner -17.6, Billy Sunday -21.8.

It will be noticed that the following names, some with high and some with low ratings, are tied: Dr. Johnson and Krazy Kat; Martin Luther and Floyd Dell; St. Augustine, Lenin and Douglas Fairbanks; Flo Ziegfeld and Frederick the Great; Geraldine Farrar and Henry Ford; Lord Tennyson and Marilynn Miller; William Wordsworth and John V. A. Weaver; Cézanne and Homer.

## *Who the Ten Critics Are*

*Heywood Broun*, in his column in the World and through other mediums, discourses wittily and humanly on books and plays.

*Henry McBride* is, among the established critics of art, the most hospitable to the modernist. He is art critic for the Sun and a monthly contributor to The Dial.

*H. L. Mencken* is, with Mr. Nathan, co-editor of the Smart Set and the most vigorous opponent of the Puritan tradition in American letters.

*George Jean Nathan* is the arch-enemy of all that is sentimental, provincial and pretentious in American drama.

*Burton Rascoe* is an enthusiastic supporter of the modern aesthetic creeds in literature and art.

*Paul Rosenfeld* combines a wide knowledge of the past, with a fervid appreciation of the modern movements in music, letters and painting.

*Gilbert Seldes*, managing editor of The Dial, subjects modern literary experiment to an uncompromising comparison with the accomplishments of the great.

*Deems Taylor*, musical critic of the World, is generous enough to the new which seems to him authentic, without losing his actual allegiance to the old.

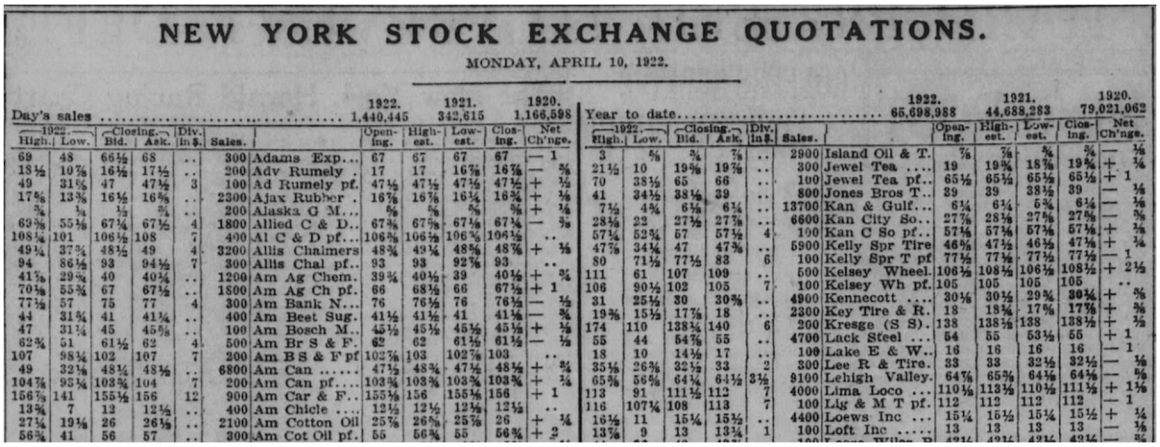
*Edmund Wilson, Jr.*, contributor of critical essays to the New Republic and Vanity Fair, upholds the classic tradition of symmetry and form.

*Willard Huntington Wright* has written extensively on music, painting and letters. He is in full sympathy with the moderns.

ideologies, styles, and oeuvre—in which the average critical demand determines value.

Although the mechanics of this chart are certainly simpler, it holds an undeniable visual similarity to the actual stock exchange reports listed in the newspapers—as we can see from the stock quotations found in the *New York Herald* in the same month (Figure 7, below). There is also similarity to be found in the delight of comparison that comes from reading through both *Vanity Fair*'s cultural exchange chart and the actual stock exchange chart. The highest-valued stocks in the *New York Herald* on April 11, 1922 are, unsurprisingly, titans of American manufacturing and retail: American Car & Foundry, the rail-car conglomerate responsible for building many of the railcars for New York's

**Figure 7.** NYSE stock quotes, *New York Herald*, 10 April 1922.



NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE QUOTATIONS.

MONDAY, APRIL 10, 1922.

| Day's sales | 1922. 1,440,445 | 1921. 342,615 | 1920. 1,166,598 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Year to date | 1922. 65,698,988 | 1921. 44,688,283 | 1920. 79,021,062 |

| 1922 High. | 1922 Low. | Closing Bid. | Closing Ask. | Div. in $. | Sales. | | Opening. | Highest. | Lowest. | Closing. | Net Ch'nge. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 69 | 48 | 66½ | 68 | .. | 300 | Adams Exp... | 67 | 67 | 67 | 67 | — 1 |
| 18½ | 10⅞ | 16½ | 17½ | .. | 200 | Adv Rumely . | 17 | 17 | 16⅞ | 16⅞ | — ⅝ |
| 49 | 31⅝ | 47 | 47½ | 3 | 100 | Ad Rumely pf. | 47½ | 47½ | 47½ | 47½ | + ½ |
| 17⅝ | 13⅜ | 16½ | 16⅝ | .. | 2300 | Ajax Rubber . | 16⅞ | 16⅞ | 16¾ | 16¾ | + ⅛ |
| ¾ | ⅛ | ½ | ¾ | .. | 200 | Alaska G M... | ⅝ | ⅝ | ⅝ | ⅝ | + ⅛ |
| 69⅜ | 55⅛ | 67¼ | 67½ | 4 | 1800 | Allied C & D.. | 67⅜ | 67⅝ | 67⅛ | 67⅛ | — ⅜ |
| 108¼ | 101 | 106½ | 108 | 7 | 400 | Al C & D pf... | 106⅝ | 106⅞ | 106⅝ | 106½ | .. |
| 49¼ | 37⅜ | 48½ | 49 | 4 | 3200 | Allis Chalmers | 48¾ | 49¼ | 48⅝ | 48⅞ | + ⅛ |
| 94 | 86½ | 93 | 94½ | 7 | 300 | Allis Chal pf.. | 93 | 93 | 92⅞ | 93 | .. |
| 41⅞ | 29⅜ | 40 | 40¾ | .. | 1200 | Am Ag Chem. | 39¾ | 40½ | 39 | 40½ | + ¾ |
| 70⅛ | 55⅜ | 67 | 67½ | .. | 1800 | Am Ag Ch pf. | 66 | 68½ | 66 | 67½ | + 1 |
| 77½ | 57 | 75 | 77 | 4 | 300 | Am Bank N... | 76 | 76½ | 76 | 76½ | — ½ |
| 44 | 31⅝ | 41 | 41¼ | .. | 400 | Am Beet Sug. | 41½ | 41½ | 41 | 41⅛ | — ⅝ |
| 47 | 31¼ | 45 | 45⅝ | .. | 100 | Am Bosch M.. | 45½ | 45½ | 45½ | 45½ | + ⅛ |
| 62¾ | 51 | 61½ | 62 | 4 | 500 | Am Br S & F. | 62 | 62 | 61½ | 61½ | — ½ |
| 107 | 98¼ | 102 | 107 | 7 | 200 | Am B S & F pf | 103⅞ | 103 | 102⅞ | 103 | .. |
| 49 | 32⅛ | 48¼ | 48⅛ | .. | 6800 | Am Can ..... | 47½ | 48¾ | 47½ | 48⅛ | + ⅝ |
| 104⅞ | 95¼ | 103¾ | 104 | 7 | 200 | Am Can pf.... | 103¾ | 103⅝ | 103⅜ | 103⅝ | + ¼ |
| 156⅞ | 141 | 155½ | 156 | 12 | 900 | Am Car & F.. | 155⅛ | 156 | 155⅛ | 156 | + 1 |
| 13⅜ | 7 | 12 | 12⅛ | .. | 400 | Am Chicle .... | 12½ | 12½ | 12⅛ | 12⅛ | .. |
| 27¼ | 19⅛ | 26 | 26⅛ | .. | 2100 | Am Cotton Oil | 25⅞ | 26⅛ | 25⅞ | 26 | + ¼ |
| 56¾ | 41 | 56 | 57 | .. | 200 | Am Cot Oil pf. | 55 | 56¾ | 55 | 56¾ | + 2 |

| 1922 High. | 1922 Low. | Closing Bid. | Closing Ask. | Div. in $. | Sales. | | Opening. | Highest. | Lowest. | Closing. | Net Ch'nge. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | ⅝ | ¾ | ⅞ | .. | 2900 | Island Oil & T. | ⅞ | ⅞ | ⅝ | ¾ | — ⅛ |
| 21½ | 10 | 19⅝ | 19⅞ | .. | 300 | Jewel Tea .... | 19 | 19¾ | 18⅝ | 19¾ | + ¾ |
| 70 | 33½ | 65 | 66 | .. | 100 | Jewel Tea pf.. | 65½ | 65½ | 65½ | 65½ | + 1 |
| 41 | 34½ | 38½ | 39 | .. | 800 | Jones Bros T.. | 39 | 39 | 38½ | 39 | — ⅛ |
| 7½ | 4¾ | 6½ | 6¾ | .. | 13700 | Kan & Gulf... | 6¼ | 6¼ | 5⅜ | 6¼ | — ⅛ |
| 28½ | 22 | 27½ | 27⅝ | .. | 6600 | Kan City So... | 27⅞ | 28⅛ | 27⅝ | 27⅝ | — ⅜ |
| 57¼ | 52⅝ | 57 | 57½ | 4 | 100 | Kan C So pf... | 57⅛ | 57⅛ | 57⅛ | 57⅛ | + ⅛ |
| 47⅞ | 34⅛ | 47 | 47⅜ | .. | 5900 | Kelly Spr Tire | 46⅝ | 47½ | 46½ | 47⅛ | + ¼ |
| 80 | 71½ | 77½ | 83 | 6 | 100 | Kelly Spr T pf | 77½ | 77½ | 77½ | 77½ | — 1 |
| 111 | 61 | 107 | 109 | .. | 500 | Kelsey Wheel. | 106½ | 108½ | 106½ | 108½ | + 2½ |
| 106 | 90½ | 102 | 105 | 7 | 100 | Kelsey Wh pf. | 105 | 105 | 105 | 105 | .. |
| 31 | 25½ | 30 | 30⅜ | .. | 4900 | Kennecott .... | 30⅛ | 30½ | 29⅜ | 30¾ | + ⅝ |
| 19⅜ | 15½ | 17⅞ | 18 | .. | 2300 | Key Tire & R. | 18 | 18¾ | 17⅝ | 17⅞ | + ⅜ |
| 174 | 110 | 138¼ | 140 | 6 | 200 | Kresge (S S). | 138 | 138½ | 138 | 138½ | + ½ |
| 55 | 44 | 54⅞ | 55 | .. | 4700 | Lack Steel ... | 54 | 55 | 53½ | 55 | + 1 |
| 18 | 10 | 14½ | 17 | .. | 100 | Lake E & W.. | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | — 1 |
| 35½ | 26⅜ | 32½ | 33 | 2 | 300 | Lee R & Tire. | 33 | 33 | 32½ | 32½ | — ⅛ |
| 65⅝ | 56⅝ | 64¼ | 64½ | 3½ | 9100 | Lehigh Valley. | 64⅞ | 65⅝ | 64⅜ | 64⅜ | — ⅝ |
| 113 | 91 | 111½ | 112 | 7 | 4000 | Lima Loco ... | 110½ | 113½ | 110½ | 111⅞ | + 1⅜ |
| 116 | 107¼ | 108 | 113 | 7 | 100 | Lig & M T pf. | 112 | 112 | 112 | 112 | — 1 |
| 16½ | 11 | 15¼ | 15½ | .. | 4400 | Loews Inc ... | 15¼ | 15½ | 15¼ | 15½ | + ¼ |
| 13⅝ | 9 | 13 | 13¼ | 1 | 100 | Loft Inc ..... | 13 | 13 | 13 | 13 | — ⅛ |

IRR and London's underground; and S. S. Kresge, whose empire of popular 5-and-dime stores would become KMart in the late 1970s. Similarly unsurprising, the highest-valued "stocks" in *Vanity Fair*'s cultural exchange market are titans of Western culture: Shakespeare (average of 22.4), of course, and Bach (22), Beethoven (19), Aristotle (16.7), and George Washington (16.5). A few more contemporary names, like Anatole France (19.1), Charlie Chaplin (17.2), and Walt Whitman (15.8), make it in among these

greats. The lowest-valued commodities are primarily those who represent passé or conservative values, often members of political or religious establishment thinking: Theodore Roosevelt (average of -9.5), William Jennings Bryan (-12.7), censorship czar John S. Sumner (-17.6), and, naturally, the well-acknowledged villain of the smart set, Billy Sunday (-21.8). Representatives of the avant-garde tend to split the panel. T. S. Eliot (average of 6.4), for example, merits an ambivalent score of 0 from Broun, McBride, Mencken, and Nathan, but pulls a full 25 from Burton Rascoe and 17 from Seldes (who would have been, at the time, right in the thick of negotiating to publish *The Waste Land*). Ezra Pound (average 4.1) suffers from a wider split, earning 20 from Rascoe but -10 from both Wilson and music critic Deems Taylor. George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (7.6) gets full marks from Rascoe and a full pan from Nathan.

We can assume that the ten critics on *Vanity Fair*'s panel did not undertake full and rigorous assessments of all two hundred entries in the chart but, as in the real exchange market, the quality of a commodity does not necessarily equate to its value. In this same issue, on the pages devoted to "The Financial Situation," Merryle Ruckesyer reports that the value of copper, for example, in 1922 has fallen by half since 1917, because domestic consumers who had grown accustomed to substituting for it during the war had not snapped back to pre-war demand, creating an oversupply in the market ("The Financial Situation" 14). Omnipresent cultural "overproducers" likewise earn a low value on the cultural exchange market—such as the screenwriter Elinor Glyn (-12.8), whose drippy romance films hogged the screen throughout the 1920s, and pulp writer Robert Chambers (-14.2), who published novels at an average clip of three per year from the turn

of the century until the mid-‘30s—suggesting that cultural commodities, too, lose their value from a surplus in the market.

“The New Order of Critical Values” provides a unique example of an overt cultural marketplace, but *Vanity Fair* constantly embeds a more subtle exchange of cultural value in the conversation between its articles. The April 1922 issue, for example, includes a photo spread of the Broadway musical comedy *Marjolaine* that praises the production for its “whimsy and charm,” but several pages later, in his review of the month’s notable theater, Heywood Broun dismisses the same production as “a trifle too sweet” (“Marjolaine,” Broun 108). Similarly, a full-page photo is devoted to the actress Doris Keane, looking stern and imposing in her costume as Catherine of Russia in *Czarina*, but Broun only briefly mentions the play in his article, remarking that, in Keane’s hands, the Russian queen “remains a picturesque personality rather than an impressive one” (“Doris Keane,” Broun 108). Sometimes the disagreement about value is more pronounced, as in this issue’s discussion of Eugene O’Neill’s recent work. That year, riding on the success of the previous year’s *Anna Christie*, for which he would win a Pulitzer, O’Neill staged two distinctly different productions at once: the highly metaphorical *The Harry Ape*, at the Provincetown Playhouse, and the domestic melodrama *The First Man*, further downtown at the Neighborhood Playhouse. In the front-matter theater review, Kenneth MacGowan deems O’Neill’s expressionist turn in *The Harry Ape* “an extraordinary leap forward for a man who has already advanced more rapidly in his art than any other playwright that our country has produced,” but he then questions the Neighborhood Players for staging *The First Man*, which he feels contains a plodding realism “out of the dramatic past” (MacGowan 16d). It’s O’Neill’s realism

rather than his experimentation, however, that make his work valuable in the caption to a full-page photo of Pauline Lord, which explains that the "naturalistic" quality of *Anna Christie* has made it "one of the high points of the season" ("Pauline Lord"). Nor can the ten critics of the "New Order of Critical Values" agree on O'Neill's value: George Jean Nathan and Deems Taylor each give him 15, while Paul Rosenfeld and Edmund Wilson each give a lukewarm 1. These small disagreements across the pages of the issue indicate that *Vanity Fair* has no investment in its critics and copywriters showing a united front: they're each allowed to articulate their own set of cultural values, often in direct contradiction to one another.

The most heavily discussed production in the April 1922 issue, the musical revue *La Chauve-Souris*, demonstrates how a single issue of *Vanity Fair* could view one product in its cultural marketplace from multiple value perspectives. A European take on American vaudeville, pitched as art theater by its director Nikita Balieff (who had studied under Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theater before the Russian Revolution), *La Chauve-Souris* dominated the cultural zeitgeist when it toured in New York in the spring of 1922. Just after the production had landed in New York, Aldous Huxley had panned it in the January 1922 issue of *Vanity Fair*, writing that its "fundamental defect" is its "remoteness from real emotion of any kind. It makes art out of art instead of out of life. It is sophisticated and literary to the last and most hopeless degree" (Huxley 57). But, Huxley hedges, given the popularity of the production, readers will certainly "have an opportunity of judging it yourself." By the April issue, it's assumed that readers have been fully saturated in *La Chauve-Souris*. "If by chance you have not seen it," begins the regular "Fashions and Pleasures of New York" column, "go at once, otherwise you will

be forced to pretend at lunch and dinner that you have seen it; because no one would dare admit he has not if he wishes to appear up on things." By April, no one at *Vanity Fair* seems to care anymore if *La Chauve-Souris* is any good; its omnipresence makes it valuable for other reasons. For Heywood Broun, it's the phenomenon against which all other musical comedy of the season must necessarily compare, and the merely "agreeable" *Marjolaine* just doesn't add up (Broun 108). The copy that nominates Nikita Balieff to the issue's monthly "Hall of Fame" mentions that he "has made a high reputation as a monologist in Russia, France, England, and America," but has clinched the Hall of Fame primarily because his revue is "just now scoring so great a success" ("We Nominate to the Hall of Fame").

*La Chauve-Souris* is valuable for reasons beyond the fact of its mere popularity, though. For one, it has a visual style that compliments *Vanity Fair'*s own. The production's scenic designer, Nicholas Remisoff, contributes stylized sketches of a globular Balieff for both Broun's review page and the "Hall of Fame" article. His sketches would continue to appear in the magazine throughout 1922, playing harmoniously with the pictorial larks of Hogarth Jr, Fish, and Ralph Barton that make up much of the magazine's visual character in the 1920s.

The revue's ubiquity, too, makes it valuable not for its own content but for how it functions as part of larger cultural trends. The "Fashions and Pleasures of New York" column of the April '22 issue observes that the show's success overseas proves how "fashionable" the modernity of American life has become to Europeans. "We now show off modern life in New York, just as they show off old castles in Italy and Spain." The article pokes fun at this phenomenon by offering a travelogue of New York's many

pleasures—a tour that quickly turns ironic, as the author extolls the wonders of steam heat, artificial floral arrangements, and "the most beguiling sales of men's socks." How fantastic it is, the article winks, that we have Europeans visiting to show us that mundane, consumer-driven American life is actually quite modern and exotic.[20] All of the references to *La Chauve-Souris* add up to a discussion about what makes the production valuable, beyond its questionable aesthetic quality: it's valuable because it's popular and successful, because knowledge of it is necessary to maintaining social capital, because it has a unique style, and because it provides a particular lens from which to see American culture writ large.

Considered as a whole, then, the April 1922 issue demonstrates how *Vanity Fair* established its middle ground by negotiating cultural values. Ann Ardis, among other scholars working with early twentieth-century periodicals, urges us to consider an issue of a magazine as a "visually and bibliographically complex composite text," rather than a mere collection of individual and discrete texts (Ardis 34). This requires us to read all of a magazine's contents—advertisements and bibliographical code as well as the "serious" editorial content—intertextually rather than paratextually, paying attention to discussions and connections that take place across an issue. When we read it intertextually, the April 1922 issue of *Vanity Fair* functions similarly to the exchange chart in "The New Order of Critical Values," mediating a range of diverse value perspectives by putting them into conversation with each other.

[20] The *Vanity Fair* writers and their coterie apparently continued to riff on this theme off the pages of the magazine, as well. In his biography of Robert Benchley, Billy Altman describes a parody revue spearheaded by Benchley and produced at Neysa McMain's salon in the spring of 1922. Entitled "No Siree!," the parody lampooned the original revue's underlying exoticization of American life, featuring numbers like a Parker-penned song called "The Everlastin' Ingénue Blues." See *Laughter's Gentle Soul: The Life of Robert Benchley* (203).

**Parataxis and the Politics of Evaluation**

Value is never inherent in *Vanity Fair*'s cultural economy, but instead is born from the marketplace of competing cultural demands, credos, and contexts. In the financial economy, however, various stakeholders often take action to control the values of commodities: governments increase interest rates or contract monetary supply in order to control the inflation of their currencies; producers intentionally slow distribution in order to create a sense of scarcity and drive demand; marketers create product differentiation through endorsements, adding the value of celebrity association to the value of the commodity itself. Cultural value is equally vulnerable to complex power relations. Critics have the power to control their readers' attitudes toward culture—through their rhetoric, through the ethos of their position *as* critic, and through power differentials embedded in the practice of reading. By staging its discussions of cultural value, however, *Vanity Fair* seeks to equalize the politics of cultural evaluation.

*Vanity Fair*'s negotiation of culture relied on rhetorical operations more complex than mere adjacency. In a time when mass-market magazines were experimenting with ad-stripping—chopping apart feature articles and distributing them throughout the ad-heavy back-pages of an issue—*Vanity Fair* mostly abstains from this practice.[21] Although the handful of longer articles in each issue do require readers to flip to the back to finish, *Vanity Fair* keeps most of its content under the roughly fifteen hundred words its layout

[21] Edward Bok of *Ladies' Home Journal* claimed to have invented this practice, but it was the *Saturday Evening Post* that perfected it during the first decades of the twentieth century. Brighton Perry lampoons the *Post*'s constant interruption of its content in the May 1919 issue of *Vanity Fair*, in one of a series of parodies of "Our Esteemed Contemporaries" (55). In the parody, nearly every article is interrupted with an ad within a paragraph of its start, sometimes mid-word.

could fit onto a single page. This means that the experience of reading *Vanity Fair* cover to cover is almost entirely *paratactic*. As a rhetorical device, parataxis resembles a grocery list—a jumble of ideas linked together without the logic-giving architecture of coordinating conjunctions. Stanley Fish, demonstrating as he explains, characterizes parataxis as "free, oral, informal, personal, concrete" (Fish 62). He goes on to note that the lack of formality in paratactic style creates the effect of "spontaneity, haphazardness, and chance" because there appears to be nothing binding the various terms together (62). When we use parataxis as a narrative style, our storytelling feels primitive (or, at least, exotic) because it contravenes the norms of western narrative—norms like temporality, story arc, and narrative authority—which assert that certain elements of a story (pacing, perspective, plot) are most important. The lack of order in a paratactic text can feel chaotic or unpracticed to a reader trained in the traditional values of reading. It demands, instead, that readers create their own order and logic, and thus participate in questioning the traditional value systems of narrative.

Parataxis, as a rhetorical strategy that disrupts the traditional value system of reading, echoed throughout different types of texts in the early twentieth century. Modernist writers like Gertrude Stein frolicked in the rhetorical politics of parataxis, creating a poetics of "radical juxtapositions," according to Susan Stanford Friedman: "Connections are suppressed, no immediately apparent, or even non-existent, to be formed in the mind of the reader through an interrogation of the possible correspondences or resonances between the disjunctive and the fragmentary" (37). Friedman encourages new modernist scholars to engage in what she calls "cultural parataxis," juxtaposing texts from distinct cultural backgrounds to uncover interpretive connections otherwise unseen.

Magazines, however, have always encouraged a low-level version of this kind of discursive reading practice. Magazines are almost always paratactic texts, particularly those with little or no ad-stripping. Although editors do assign logic to an issue through arrangement and layout, we as readers tend to disregard the regulations of that logic more with magazines than with virtually any other medium. When you sit down to read a novel or a poem, or to watch a movie or a play, you generally start at the beginning and work linearly through the text; by contrast, when most readers sit down to read a magazine, they begin by browsing the table of contents or simply flipping through the pages, moving through the text in whatever order strikes them in the moment. This practice of reading encourages readers to make their own connections between articles and assign their own values to content. As such, the paratactic mechanism of juxtaposition in a text like a magazine effectively implicates the reader in the text's discourse of ideas.[22]

*Vanity Fair* amplifies the parataxis embedded in magazines by juxtaposing content that offers diverse value perspectives, encouraging readers to search for connections between different echelons of culture—and, often, explicitly so. In one striking example, the April 1919 issue (in which we also find Robert Benchley's book review of the *The Theory of the Leisure Class*) replaces the usual editorial page with a study guide billed as "An Ideal Method for Teachers and Pupils to Pursue in their School

[22] Jeremy Braddock makes a similar argument about the way that modernist collections of artwork created "provisional institutions," eschewing the paternalism of established cultural institutions and replacing it with a more democratic mode of public engagement that emphasized the relationship between audience and artwork (*Collecting as Modernist Practice* 3). Rather than focus on the rhetorical function of juxtaposition, as I'm doing here, Braddock turns to Bourdieu to think about modernist collections as homologously structured cultural fields. Although I think it would be fruitful to consider middlebrow magazines in terms of Braddock's concept of provisional institutions—particularly as he himself is ambivalent about whether to include magazines under this umbrella—doing so here would require circling back to Bourdieu's social theories in a way that would ultimately reinforce the stigmas of middlebrow culture that I've previously discussed.

Work." The guide positions the magazine as a primer on the "Big, Vital Facts of Life" by asking mock-serious comprehension questions about eleven of the articles in the issue ("How to Study This Number"). It dryly states that "*Vanity Fair* is, of course, used very widely in the schools throughout the country as a reference work in matters of national and international progress," but many of the questions in the study guide deliberately undercut the issue's content and the magazine's editorial reputation: regarding a photograph of Irene Castle, the study guide highlights *Vanity Fair*'s seeming mindless devotion to celebrity by asking readers to "Give the date of issue of the number of *Vanity Fair* which did not contain" a similar photo; another question pokes fun at fashion writer Robert Lloyd Trevor's synesthetic writing style, asking what exactly constitutes a "quiet four-in-hand scarf" and pressing readers to "describe a garrulous four-in-hand." Other questions reinforce the punchlines of the articles: the first question on Benchley's review of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* asks readers to contrast Veblen's ideas to those of the vernacular and pro-business Mr. Dooley.

The questions in the study guide prompt us to read the issue evaluatively and paratactically. By calling attention to its own fascination with celebrity, or to some of the infelicitous writing in its own pages, the issue gives readers permission to find it a little silly. It also, however, tests the reader's ability to put the silly in conversation with the staid, to recognize affinities between Ring Lardner and Thorstein Veblen and to uncover hypocrisy and self-seriousness wherever it may lie. Moreover, the study guide encourages readers to read the issue out of order, flipping forward to read articles and then back to the editorial page to get the jokes. The study guide editorial empowers its readers to flatten the value systems embedded in the act of reading by disregarding

several of the "shoulds" of reading: that a text should be read sequentially, that a magazine's contents should have a unified voice and editorial message, that individual articles in a magazine should be hermetically sealed from one another.

The paratactical urging undertaken by this issue and, less explicitly, by every issue of *Vanity Fair* implicates the reader in its evaluative discussion and encourages a mode of reading that equalizes the politics of critical evaluation. Any critical undertaking sets up a hierarchy of evaluation but *Vanity Fair* also habitually called into question the integrity of critical authority—even its own. As we've just seen, *Vanity Fair'*s critics regularly disagree with each other, even within the same issue, and the magazine pokes fun at itself and its writers as often as anything else. The April 1922 issue, for example, features a double-page Ralph Barton illustration that lampoons the bad behavior of the "Typical First Night Audience in New York." The spread arranges a "social panorama" of caricatured celebrities dressed in eveningwear, ranging from Florenz Ziegfield and Billie Burke to D. W. Griffith and the stern-looking pastor John Roach Straton—all staring with expectation at the reader, through the fourth wall of the magazine page, as we gaze critically back at them from the perspective of an actor on the stage. Notably, amidst this crowd of fervent theater-goers, two of the only audience members who aren't paying any attention are also regularly featured as theater authorities in the pages of *Vanity Fair*: Heywood Broun ignores the stage and instead gazes with unabashed prurience at Blanche Livingston Hoyt, a socialite from a very prominent family, sitting next to him. George Jean Nathan, the caption explains, is pictured "leaving the theatre in the middle of the second act" (Barton 53). Even when Broun and Nathan *are* paying attention, though, *Vanity Fair* doesn't seem to put much stock in their opinions. Both

critics, to illustrate, give James Joyce a remarkably tepid grade in "The New Order of Critical Values": Broun assigns Joyce a score of 0, and Nathan gives him a 2 (the same score, incidentally, that Broun gives Nathan). Just a few pages later, however, the same issue features a prose portrait of Joyce, written with breathless fascination by Djuna Barnes. Through all the little ways the magazine's contributors disagree and poke fun at each other, *Vanity Fair* deflates whatever power its critics might wield over the cultural marketplace.

Since *Vanity Fair* is a written text, however, the politics of evaluation are necessarily entangled with the power structures embedded in the act of reading—particularly the reading of a text that critiques culture. In his recent book, *Better Living Through Criticism,* consummate critic A. O. Scott resynthesizes, for the internet age, all the old gripes against criticism, from Aristotle to Sontag and beyond. Cataloging many of the classic stories of destruction wrought by a critic's pen (Melville labored in obscurity until after his death; Keats's death was itself sped along by a scathing review), Scott asserts that the "trouble with criticism" has always been that writing a review, in itself, gives a critic power over the value of culture. "They have the power to shut down plays with bad reviews and to consign worthy books and their authors to cruel and unjust oblivion" (Scott *Better Living* 127). This is, of course, overstating the case for effect: it is the rare critic who has enough clout to affect that kind of "aesthetic and even literal homicide" (127). Scott makes this exaggeration, though, to emphasize that the rhetorical structure of criticism depends on a power differential between the knowledgeable critic and his credulous reader. Whether those roles are appropriate or not, criticism casts author and audience into them—often resulting in the well-rehearsed protestation against

not only specific critics but also criticism in general. "Alienation from the common lot is so deeply embedded in the basic idea of what a critic must be that it becomes necessary, again and again, to assert otherwise" (151). Criticism's *raison d'être* is evaluation, to impart an opinion from a position of authority, which necessitates a persuadable potential reader. This rhetorical distance means that, even for those readers trained to recognize their own interpretive power over a text, criticism naturally lends extra political weight to the authorial voice.

This engagement in the politics of cultural evaluation reverses the didactic relationship that critics often describe between critical mediators and middlebrow readers. Echoing the fabled first definition of middlebrows as "people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the things they ought to like," many scholars of middlebrow culture recognize middlebrow texts as those concerned with teaching middle-class readers how to comport themselves in the manner of the upper crust (qtd D'Hoker 259)[23]. Some critics simply take this didactic quality for granted. Daniel Tracy, for example, matter-of-factly concludes that "the obsession with refinement as cultural capital" was the reason why Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was originally published in a middlebrow magazine, "that is, one devoted to teaching its readers the contents of high culture" (Tracy 116). Other critics, like Nicola Humble, have taken more time to explain how middlebrow texts instruct their readers in the code-switching necessary to climb the social ladder. Humble concerns herself specifically with middlebrow novels for women, asserting that this type of novel "functions in part as a

[23] See chapter I for my analysis and recontextualization of this definition, originally found in a 1925 issue of *Punch* magazine.

form of conduct literature, offering its largely middle-middle- and lower-middle-class readers access to the elaborate codes that mark the borders of upper-middle-class-identity, allowing them to 'pass' if they read correctly and apply the results of their reading" (44-45).[24] From this perspective, middlebrow culture operates as a kind of halfway house for social climbers, a place where the bourgeoisie can go to learn how to assimilate themselves into high-class life. Middlebrow readers read so they can learn how to become highbrow readers. *Vanity Fair*, on the contrary, employs parataxis to invite readers to participate in the politics of reading and evaluation, to play a part in its negotiation of the cultural middle. In short, *Vanity Fair* teaches middlebrow readers how to read like middlebrows.

**The Sophisticated Distance of Irony**

Parataxis can only go so far to equalize the politics of reading, however, and critics have argued that, for all its mediation of value, *Vanity Fair* was also guilty of weaponizing ironic tone to entrench critical authority. Certainly, the playfulness of the writing in *Vanity Fair* often seems to favor readers with a certain level of both rhetorical and cultural competency, a pretentious in-group of readers who already know the right kinds of things. The April 1922 issue provides an ideal example of the need for both, in an allegorical article by Nancy Boyd called "Out of Reach of the Baby."[25] The article begins with an exasperated narrator explaining that, since the baby of the house

[24] See chapter II for greater discussion on the (enforced) links between the middlebrow and middle-class readers.

[25] Nancy Boyd was a pseudonym that Edna St. Vincent Millay used for her prose contributions to *Vanity Fair*.

"swallowed the buttonhook and nearly died," father has decreed that all household items deemed dangerous to the baby must reside on "a high shelf in the storeroom, out of reach of us all." Unfortunately, nearly anything can kill a baby, and the narrator's family is now forced to cobble together an existence without any of their possessions: "you can readily imagine how full a life we lead since the day the baby ate the buttonhole." For the reader who doesn't immediately catch on to the allegory from the hint in the article's subtitle—"A Pleasing Ditty, 'Censorship is Making the World Safe for the Baby,' to be Sung to the Tune of 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee"—the article seems at first whimsical and a little silly.

As the article progresses, however, its reliance on allegorical linkages begins to dispel some of its whimsy. The narrator explains, about halfway through, that the head of the household is a politician who "has spent the best years of his life in an endeavor to make the world safe for stupidity." When any of the household complain about the way their father has enacted this crusade on the domestic level, he quotes Abraham Lincoln: "a house divided against itself cannot stand." With this clue, a less savvy reader with at least some basic understanding of American history might start to catch on to the allegory: the father represents a paternalistic government using censorship to ostensibly protect an infantile public, absurdly justifying himself with Civil War rhetoric.

Basic knowledge of American history, however, is not enough to help readers follow the allegory when the narrator begins to recount the injustices that the shelf policy have wrought upon members of the household: Fritz, the musician, has had his violin placed on the shelf; Isadora has been told that her dancing will shake the floor and wake the baby; Sara, an aspiring actress, and Enrico, a singer, are now required to keep their

voices below a whisper. Here, the article requires familiarity with all echelons of contemporary culture, in order to understand that these names refer to Fritz Kreisler, Isadora Duncan, Sarah Bernhardt, and Enrico Caruso—all artists who, at different times in the first two decades of the twentieth century, were boycotted or shunned by conservative groups.[26] The narrator concludes the article with a moral: fed up with the limitations imposed upon them because of the baby, "most of us…have left home. And for those of us who remain, it is not so much that we remain as that we haven't gone yet." A reader who knows that each of the artists mentioned have left the U.S. in favor of greater artistic opportunity abroad understands this moral, that American cultural policy aiming to appease conservative populism will eventually chase away its best talent. A reader without that level of cultural literacy, however, is left adrift. Articles like this one set up a hierarchy of "right" readers, where our rightness depends on how well we understand Boyd's use of cultural and rhetorical modes.

Faye Hammill refers to this necessary cultural literacy as the "sophisticated reading position" that *Vanity Fair* requires of its readers ("In Good Company" 124). She writes that the magazine "addressed a reader who is literate in both high and popular culture, and who possesses or aspires to wit, discriminating tastes, style and current knowledge" (128). Hammill's picture of the sophisticated *Vanity Fair* reader owes much to Jessica Burstein's reading of sophistication in the irony of Dorothy Parker. Although Parker was only on the staff of *Vanity Fair* for a short time, her acerbic wit played a key

[26] Kreisler, who served in the Austrian army during WWI, experienced several protests from the American Legion in 1920; Duncan moved to Europe at the turn of the century, fed up with the silliness and artlessness of American dance; Bernhardt's production of *Judas* was banned in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia in 1910, after only one performance; Caruso was lambasted by the gossip papers in 1906, after he was accused of molesting a (nonexistent) woman in the monkey house of the Central Park Zoo.

role in the development of the magazine's playful, perhaps even pretentious, tone and the demands that it placed on its readers. [27] According to Burstein, Parker's own sophistication—which Hammill transfers to *Vanity Fair* and its readers, more broadly—arises from her ability to "ironically" bring sentimentality together with the blasé. Though writing at a time when honest emotion was decidedly out of vogue, Parker never shied away from building a review around the way a book or a production made her feel (or not feel).[28] According to Burstein, the "adhesive powers" of the sentimental—its ability to bond readers with texts, and with other readers, through emotional connection—leads many critics to place Parker's work in opposition to the disconnectedness of more canonical modernist writing (227, 232). Burstein argues, à la Georg Simmel, that sentiment in the modern context necessarily leads to a disconnected, blasé attitude. Rather than the absence of feeling, the blasé results from a surfeit of sentiment: it's a disinclination to distinguish between individual moments of emotion while awash in the stimulus of the modern metropolis. For Burstein, Parker's brilliance as an ironist comes from her ability to bring together these two seemingly contrasting qualities—the sentimental and the blasé. As a critic, Parker regularly presents her own emotional life as interesting and distinctive while also preferring not to recognize the

[27] Parker was also instrumental in the magazine finding the *limits* of its playful tone. Crowninshield poached Parker from *Vogue* in 1917, and she worked as a staff writer until she was fired in 1920. Her dismissal, famously rumored, was ordered by Nast himself, after Parker insulted Nast's friend Billie Burke in a review. (It also probably didn't help that Florenz Ziegfeld, Burke's husband, was a major advertiser for the magazine.) Robert Benchley supposedly resigned from his position as managing editor, in solidarity with Parker—though he continued to write regularly for the magazine throughout the 1920s. The end of the Parker/Benchley era demonstrates the boundaries of *Vanity Fair's* material middleness: while the writers of the magazine were given quite a lot of freedom, they still, in the end, operated under the constraints of a commercial publication. See Marion Meade, *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This* for the official biographical version of Parker's time at *Vanity Fair*, or Meade's *Bobbed Hair and Bathtub Gin* for a more familiar, narrative version.

[28] See Burstein, pg 234, for a catalog of times when Parker unabashedly wept at something she was reviewing.

unique emotional experiences of others. The result is an urban, modern version of sentimentality, characterized, according to Burstein, by "narcissism, withdrawal, and isolation" (247). And what Burstein reads in Parker's work, Hammill extrapolates to *Vanity Fair* as a text. Its "sophistication" develops out of a Bartlebyan attitude toward its readers' needs: although the magazine playfully traffics in cultural discussion, it would simply prefer not to explain itself.

Irony, according to some theories of its mechanics, would be the perfect trope for articulating this kind of sophistication. According to D. C. Muecke's influential 1969 treatise, for example, there are three formal elements necessary for a statement to be ironic. The first is a "double-layered or two-storey [sic] phenomenon," in which the literal or apparent meaning resides on the "lower" level while on the "upper" level is the "situation as it appears" to the ironist; the second requirement is an "opposition" between the two levels, a contradiction or incongruity that spurs the knowing observer to look up and realize that a higher level exists; and the third element is a potential "victim," who is confident that the lower level, the literal meaning, is all there is (19-20). The victim—real or imagined—is integral to the operation of irony, because his presence validates the superior cleverness of those who stand on the upper level. The victim isn't simply a patsy, however: "The alazon or victim is the man who blindly assumes or asserts that something is or is not the case…Simple ignorance is safe from irony, but ignorance compounded with the least degree of confidence counts as intellectual hubris and is a punishable offence" (30). The more confidence the victim has in his own position, that is, the better.

This two-level schematic of irony aligns almost exactly with Hammill's characterization of sophistication and its logic of distinction. The inverse of *Vanity Fair*'s sophisticated reader is not necessarily the yokel that H. L. Mencken might lampoon, or the "old lady in Dubuque" against whom Harold Ross contrasted his ideal *New Yorker* reader,[29] but the kind of reader who might merely *pretend* to be informed. The magazine "rejected, in particular, those who seek distinction through fraudulent intellectual posturing or an adulterated 'bohemianism'" ("In Good Company" 132). The sophisticated reader is sophisticated not only because she "gets" the playful jokes and references made by the magazine's writers but also because she can contrast herself against a potential *un*sophisticated reader who only *thinks* he understands. In both irony and sophistication, the victims—those readers who don't have the necessary cultural literacy or the necessary attitude—are left powerless to share in the act of meaning-making. This is not to say that irony and sophistication are the same, nor even that they have a causal relationship. But, the functions of both the trope and the attitude are so similar that, when used together, they can't help but reinforce the sense that someone is getting left out.

However, the politics of inclusion and exclusion are not so clear-cut with *Vanity Fair*. Indeed, Burstein's argument for Parker's sophistication relies on an insufficiently precise reading of the writer's use of irony. For example, Burstein demonstrates her argument with a short reading of Parker's 1927 poem "Bohemia":

> Authors and actors and artists and such
>
> Never know nothing, and never know much.

[29] Hammill develops both of these examples further. See *Sophistication*, 162-3.

Sculptors and singers and those of their kidney

Tell their affairs from Seattle to Sydney.

Playwrights and poets and such horses' necks

Start off from anywhere, end up at sex.

Diarists, critics, and similar roe

Never say nothing, and never say no.

People Who Do Things exceed my endurance;

God, for a man that solicits insurance!

Making no distinction between Parker and the speaker of the poem, Burstein sums up the poem's logic of sophisticated urban distinction: "if everyone else does it, I don't" (Burstein 235). "True sophistication" in this poem, Burstein reasons, lies in Parker's desire for "a middle-class stiff" to take her away from the practiced restlessness of the bohemians: "Within the poem's bohemian realm, the insurance man…is most attractive by virtue of its uniqueness—nobody else in that circle 'does' insurance" (235). This reading, however, takes Parker at her word that she *actually* desires "a man who solicits insurance." Although Burstein mentions that Parker's desire exists only within the urban context—she would never long for that insurance salesman if she lived in Dubuque—she otherwise takes the final line of the poem literally.

Rather, the speaker of the poem objects not to people who do things, but to People Who Do Things: that is, those who perform their sophistication by talking about their accomplishments, those who "Tell their affairs from Seattle to Sydney." There is a performative quality, too, to the speaker's objection, in both her exaggerated claim that insurance salesmen don't Do Things and her theatrical sigh of "God" at the beginning of

the last line. This performance provides a clue that the speaker isn't serious in her longing for the "middle-class stiff." It also indicates the larger performance of the poem: the speaker only *pretends* to be blasé. The poem's tightly rhymed couplets give the illusion of resigned easiness to support the speaker's disavowal of bohemian life, but that same careful form also betrays the speaker's blasé attitude as a little too practiced and a little too performed. Indeed, the nursery rhyme quality of the poem comes from a precise attention to language and rhythm and, despite the speaker's claim that she doesn't care for the bohemians, the poem's catalog of bohemian types proves the speaker to be someone who pays quite a lot of attention to them. While the speaker pretends to disdain those who perform their sophistication by incessantly talking about it, she implicates herself in that group by using carefully practiced language to perform her own sophistication. The speaker's use of irony complicates rather than reinforces the politics of exclusion that the poem seems to advocate, leaving the speaker both inside and outside of her own sophisticated circle.

If, following Hammill's lead, we extrapolate Parker's ironic stylings to the tone of *Vanity Fair,* this poem demonstrates that irony complicates rather than clarifies which kind of reader belongs in the in-crowd. Although Hammill's exploration of the sophisticated reading does much to explain *Vanity Fair*'s material middleness, it cannot account for the complicated ways that the magazine engages its readers in discussions of culture. Irony certainly serves as an important mechanism of that engagement but, to gain a better understanding of how that mechanism functions, we must consider more precisely how irony itself works.

**Gathering the Mist: Stable Irony**

Nearly every book that aspires to explain irony, or some part of it, begins with an observation of the sheer size and diffusiveness of the topic. Linda Hutcheon, for example, begins *Irony's Edge* by noting that the *MLA International Bibliography* for just one decade (1980-1990) lists 1,445 entries under the subject of "irony." More poetically, D. C. Muecke begins *The Compass of Irony* by musing that "getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mist: there is plenty to take hold of if only one could" (3). In his introduction to *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne Booth admits that irony is a device so often invoked, in so many different situations that it suffers from some mission drift. He jokes about an *International Herald-Tribune* article that appeared while he was finishing the draft of his book, in April 1970, which used the word irony in three different ways to discuss the complications of the Apollo-13 flight. "The irony is that such ironies," Booth reflects playfully, "defined with such ironic indifference to precision, multiply on every hand, leaving the ironic critic caught in the ironic trap of defining a term that will not stay defined" (Booth 2).

With some attention to precision, however, we can isolate particular forms of irony and focus on their rhetorical functions. Booth quickly announces his lack of interest in most of what often gets referred to colloquially as irony: non-verbal ironies delivered with a wink or a jab of the elbow; dramatic ironies; "all 'cosmic ironies' and 'ironies of fate' and 'ironies of event'" invoked by a vague musing of "isn't it ironic that…" (2); and irony as an abstract "concept" or philosophy, as explored by Kierkegard or Kenneth Burke (xiii). He focuses instead on irony as it manifests itself in the utterances of authors and characters—irony that can be pointed to, on the page, and read with some degree of

standardization by different types of readers. Booth has a double interest in this form of irony. As a rhetorician, he explicitly desires to "deal with specific ironies in the 'real world'" and "how they make themselves understood or fail to do so" (xiii). That is, he's interested in understanding how irony, as a rhetorical figure, helps or hinders communication between interlocutors. Less explicitly, as the kind of rhetoric scholar who enjoys breaking forms of communication into steps and processes, Booth seems interested in this specific manifestation of irony because it appears "stable" to him, characterized by "literary fixity" and "a limited set of reading tasks" (3).

Booth enumerates those tasks in four steps for "reconstructing" a stable ironic utterance. First, the reader rejects the literal meaning of the utterance, because it contains "an unspoken proposition" that something is not right, because the meaning of the utterance is not logical or doesn't make sense in the context of the larger work. Second, the reader weighs "alternative interpretations or explanations" from outside of the text, wondering if perhaps "it is a slip, or [the author] is crazy, or I missed something earlier, or that word must mean something I don't know about" (11). Rejecting those alternatives, the reader thirdly considers "the author's knowledge or beliefs" to ensure that the author intends a non-literal meaning. Finally, "having made a decision about the knowledge or beliefs of the speaker, we can finally choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings with which we can rest secure" because the new meaning is "in harmony" with the reader's sense of the speaker (12).

Booth's four steps for reconstructing stable irony provide a way to understand the work involved in reading an issue of *Vanity Fair*. Although we should problematize Booth's confidence in the "fixity" of stable irony, we can recognize the phenomenon he

describes whenever we try to take *Vanity Fair* articles at their word. Robert Benchley's review of the *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in the April 1919 issue, for example, concludes that Veblen's treatise is "on the whole…a good work, hastily done. In the hands of a more serious-minded student it might have been developed to greater lengths" (Benchley 39). This assertion rings logically dissonant with the rest of the article: the quotations that Benchley has provided from the book betray it, instead, as a dense work of scholarship, even to a fault. In the middle of the article, to take one of his examples, Benchley quotes Veblen's determination that "drunkenness and the other pathological consequences of the free use of stimulants" can be seen as a form of conspicuous consumption—excessive indulgence for the sake of proving that one can afford to be excessively indulgent. Neither the temperance-minded spirit of that contention nor Veblen's fussy, diffuse prose align with Benchley's characterization of him as "not serious-minded" enough or of his work as "hastily done." Benchley's conclusion about Veblen, then, brings us to the first step of Booth's procedure. Given the rest of the information provided us in the article, we realize that the literal meaning of Benchley's conclusion just isn't true.

The next step in Booth's process, then, is to wonder whether there's something wrong with our reading skills or with Benchley's writing. The signals of logical inconsistency in the passage aren't typos or mistakes, nor are they difficult to understand. While Robert Benchley does tend to drift into arche constructions that make it difficult to understand his writing, these two sentences are simple and directly stated. Can it be possible, then, Benchley himself doesn't understand what he's talking about? The

competence with which he playfully bats around Veblen's writing would lead us to believe otherwise.

If the logical inconsistency isn't a mistake in the writing or the reading, then we must next weigh what we know about Benchley to ensure that he intends us to infer an alternative meaning. By this point in reading the article, we've already had to do several reconstructions of Benchley's claims about Veblen, at other moments when those claims have not aligned with the passages that he quotes from *Leisure Class*: Veblen is obviously not influenced by the "You-Know-Me-Al" school of writing, nor does Veblen ever, as Benchley claims, "let himself go, to the point of being ribald." Even if we know nothing else of Robert Benchley or *Vanity Fair*, this article gives us enough information to create the image of an author who makes regular use of sarcasm, understatement, and lampoon.

Given that knowledge, we are free to assign an alternative, ironic meaning to Benchley's assertion that Veblen's writing is hasty and trivial. Here is where things get complicated, however: in order to propose a new meaning for the statement, we need not only to have gathered a composite view of Benchley but also to have caught on that the Junior League, not Veblen, is the real victim of his writing. It's not enough to simply assume the inverse of the literal meaning.[30] While it's true that Veblen's writing is the opposite of hasty, and that he actually *is* serious-minded, that is not really what Benchley is getting at here. Although the final section of the article pretends to draw conclusions about Veblen's book, the name of the section is "Light Reading for Debutantes." Benchley infers that Veblen's work is "light reading" because it tends to get read

[30] Johnson's 1775 dictionary famously reduces irony to "a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words" (Booth 29).

lightly—at least by those debutantes balking at the prospect of attending lectures at Veblen's new university. For the women protesting against Veblen without having read his work—or at least read it enough to see their own likeness in it—*The Theory of the Leisure Class* might as well be trivial and hastily written.

**Amiable Communities**

Once we've done this work of identifying Benchley's irony and reconstructing his meaning, we have a sense that we've banded together with him, distinguished ourselves from the rubes—embodied, in this case, by the Junior League protestors. Contrary to the "narcissism, withdrawal, and isolation" that Burstein locates in the ironic sophistication of Dorothy Parker, the experience of reading the ironic articles in *Vanity Fair*, once all the work is done, is one of joining a community of sophisticates. According to Linda Hutcheon, the feeling of community that can result from reading irony is a product of its "edge"—of the evaluative attitude shared between the text and the reader, and the complex power relations that evokes. That edge produces an "affective charge," the intensity of which depends on how much a reader must share the evaluative attitude of the text in order to understand its ironic statements. Different functions of irony, Hutcheon explains, employ its potential power differential to different extents, and consequently produce more or less affective charge. In what Hutcheon calls its "ludic" function, for example, irony can only produce a moderate affective charge: a positive charge if the statement comes across to the reader as humorous or playful, or a negative one if a reader finds the ironic statement irresponsible or reductive.[31] The most intense

[31] Hutcheon (literally) charts the functions of irony against affective charge in order to argue that there is a spectrum of things that "happen" when irony is used or read. The functions and charges in the chart are not

affective charge, by Hutcheon's accounting, comes from irony's "aggregative" function, its ability to include or exclude, and therefore traffic heavily in the power relationships between author, text, subject, and reader. To one extreme, the aggregative function of irony runs the risk of making readers feel excluded, as if author and text are colluding against us. That risk, however, also allows for the thrill of understanding an ironic statement and feeling a part of a "small, select, secret society" (51). As Hutcheon writes, when irony includes, it can create a bond between author, text, and reader, "thus recalling the pleasures of collaboration" (52).

Wayne Booth refers to that pleasurable bond as the "amiable community" that irony creates and moderates. Because of its potential for exclusion, irony has developed a reputation as a weapon of elitism. As Hutcheon explains, "Some theorists have felt that the implied superiority/inferiority dualism is implied [sic] in any ironic distancing, and look to Kierkegaard's famous and much cited statement that irony is not understood by all because it 'travels in an exclusive incognito, as it were, and looks down from its exalted station with compassion on ordinary pedestrian speech'" (Hutcheon 51). By this logic, irony favors only those hearty, skilled readers who can see past the disguise of literal meaning to what lies beneath, unexpressed, and thereby divides the superior readers from the inferior. Booth, however, argues that superiority is far more attainable than Kierkegaard's "exclusive incognito" would lead us to believe. In fact, an ironic statement creates "a larger community, with fewer outsiders, than would have been built by non-ironic statement," because irony allows for a wider range of interpretation (Booth

---

of her own devising, but serve as a literature review of classical and modern rhetorical thought on irony, "a provisional attempt to articulate and order some of the ways critics over the years have voiced their approval or disapproval of what is often presented as a single thing—irony—operating in a single way" (43).

29). When we read a literal statement, we're left with a relatively binary choice: is the statement truthful or not? An ironic statement, however, presents a wider spectrum of interpretive choices—anything can be truthful *but* the literal meaning. Booth demonstrates this inclusivity using Dr. Johnson's example of irony in his 1755 dictionary: "Bolingbroke was a holy man." Johnson is referring to Henry St. John, the Viscount Bolingbroke, who spent much of his political life decrying religion and theology—and who was therefore decidedly *not* a holy man. Johnson's ironic statement, however, offers a more complicated reading of Bolingbroke than if he had simply said "Bolingbroke is unholy." As Booth explains: "*Unholy* is relatively narrow and at the far end of the scale of blame that Bolingbroke's critics might be willing to apply. But *holy* as irony can be accepted and enjoyed by everyone who is in any degree suspicious or critical of Bolingbroke…from 'not always quite as virtuous as he ought to be' to 'vile'" (29). Rather than telling us exactly what to think of Bolingbroke, Johnson uses irony to assemble an "amiable community" of readers with a wide range of evaluative positions.

Amiable communities bond together not only through the final product of interpretation, a shared idea of *what* an ironic statement means, but also by shared participation in the politics of reading that result from irony's evaluative edge. While deciphering the more complex irony in Benchley's article about Veblen and the Junior League, we go through a process of evaluation similar to what Booth observes with Johnson's Bolingbroke example. If Benchley were to conclude his article by explicitly declaring the Junior League debutantes vapid and incapable of viewing their own hypocrisy, he would leave his readers simply to weigh the merits of the statement and decide whether or not it is truthful. Instead, he circuitously expresses his opinion of the

debutantes through ironic declarations of what Veblen's work obviously is *not*: hasty, unserious, and under-developed. He allows us to decide on our own what Veblen's work actually *is,* and to come accordingly to our own opinions of Veblen's detractors—an opinion that could range anywhere from "those silly girls" to "what despicable hypocrites." As Booth puts it, the evaluation necessary in reading irony "makes the results more actively our own": "since the reader has in a sense put the final position together for himself, he can scarcely resist [taking ownership of the position]: 'Not only do I see it for what it is, but it must be sound since it is my own'" (Booth 41). Rather than tell us what to think of the Junior Leaguers, Benchley's ironic mode forces us to do the work of evaluation ourselves and therefore share with him the power of authorship.

When we pay careful attention to the process of reading irony in *Vanity Fair*, we start to see the "sophisticated reading position" that it requires as far more inclusive than Burstein or Hammill would have us believe. Irony always comes with the risk of misunderstanding or "exclusion"—in fact, Booth believes that "it risks disaster more aggressively than any other device" (41). When it works, however, stable irony brings readers together into an amiable interpretive community, because the work of reconstructing an ironic statement involves a complex evaluative process that fully implicates us in the politics of interpretation.

**The Community of Readers that *Vanity Fair* Is For**

The evaluative edge that Hutcheon assigns to irony does not belong to irony alone, but irony ramps up the stakes of the evaluative choices that reading always requires. Booth refers to those evaluative choices as "judgments," and explains that any

reconstruction of irony is necessarily accompanied by a series of four judgements: "1) a judgement against the overt proposition and 2) a decision about where the author stands…3) whether the reconstructed building [meaning] is indeed a good place to dwell in, and 4) whether the ironist was justified in forcing us to go through all this trouble" (39-40). Booth acknowledges that these four judgements also exist in the reading of most other types of figurative language—metaphors, for example. However, the reading of irony makes these judgements more explicit. All reading requires us to make choices about what is correct and what is not, or whether we agree or not. By slowing down the process of understanding, however, by forcing us to inhabit the position of the author, irony implicates us more actively in the meaning-making. When irony works, it not only amplifies the meaning of the statement—because the reader has played a more active role in creating it—but the reader also feels more empowered to continue reading. We feel as if we have greater agency in our relationship with the text because we've been let in on the joke.

This is different from the ways that scholars often read the workings of irony in modernist texts. Matthew Stratton argues, *contra* Booth, that there is no such thing as a "stable" irony and, indeed, its very instability—which he denotes by regularly putting the term in parenthesis—emphasizes difference: "the difference between what is said and what is meant (verbal irony), between what an audience knows and what a character knows (dramatic irony)…between the coherent, knowing subject and the capability of that subject to transcend and examine the conditions of its own subjectivity" (10-11). This last type of irony is responsible for much of the feeling of "distance" ascribed to modernist writing, and to the aestheticized perspective that modernist texts often claim in

order to separate themselves from the unthinking masses. Michael North, however, has argued that the distancing power of irony actually makes it more largely representative of the cultural attitudes of the interwar period, when most audiences, including popular ones, had become "progressively aestheticized": "as audiences begin to consume imaginative and symbolic material as they had previously consumed material goods, then everyday life acquires an inherently ironic distance from itself" (North 208). North's argument, then, is to open up the "purview of modernist studies" to previously unconsidered authors and works, those that are also "capable of an ironic self-reflexiveness every bit the equal of that found in the established writers" (209). Indeed, his nominees—Claude McKay, Willa Cather, and Anzia Yezierska—have since become figureheads of the current pluralistic trends in modernist studies.

The irony in *Vanity Fair* can sometimes look a lot like certain types of modernist irony. Conrad's *Secret Agent*, for example, traffics constantly in stable irony which Conrad admits, in his 1920 preface to the novel, serves a didactic purpose. "Man may smile and smile but he is not an investigating animal. He loves the obvious." The "ironic treatment" that Conrad employs is a training regimen meant to *turn* readers into investigating animals, in stark distinction to Verloc, the novel's lazy, naïve, self-satisfied protagonist. Being an investigating animal requires not only reading carefully, but also re-reading and reading back, putting different characters and scenes in conversation with each other, and pushing against characters' explicit motivations. But if this sounds like the irony in *Vanity Fair*, does that mean—as North seems to argue—that we should make room for *Vanity Fair* within the "modernist purview"? Certainly, this argument has been made by scholars like David Earle, who attempt to legitimate popular culture forms by

hitching them to modernism with a hyphen.[32] It has also been resisted by those scholars who, like Ann Ardis, are skeptical of literary modernism's colonial tendencies.[33] Perhaps it means, instead, that modernist writers such as Conrad might *also* be considered middlebrow.

Which is not to say, either, that all use of stable irony is middlebrow, nor that all middlebrow is fundamentally ironic. Irony can be a trap: it's so easy to call everything ironic, and lump all ironies together. Matthew Stratton notes that irony has often been used to make sweeping political claims about groups of people, in a way that no other device or trope has:

> The use of 'irony' to make broader claims about textual and collective identities certainly isn't limited to class but includes many other categories of identity. It should raise multiple eyebrows to proclaim that the working class is particularly adept with syllepsis, that Zimbabweans are averse to symbols, that Swedes are natively skeptical…and yet these kinds of claims have long been made about irony in a wide variety of specifically political contexts. (Stratton 7-8)

My goal in this essay is not to proclaim that middlebrow culture or those who participate in it are fundamentally "ironic," but rather to examine the ways that irony was used as a tool to bind together a community of middlebrow readers and develop a form of reading that could exemplify the middlebrow perspective of negotiating simultaneous value perspectives.

---

[32] See Earle's discussion of "pulp modernism" in *Re-covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009.

[33] See Ardis, pp 19-20.

Irony's tendency to amplify the judgments involved in reading plays an important role in the way that *Vanity Fair* models discussions of value and engages readers in middlebrow culture. Not all examples of stable irony in *Vanity Fair* contain easy clues that trigger ironic reconstruction, as Benchley's article does. The same April 1919 issue contains an article that abridges a paper on "esthesiomania" published by I. L. Nascher in the February 1919 *Medical Times* (Nascher 42). The article, which describes the psychological deviance of Greenwich Village bohemians, at first seems inconsistent with the magazine's stylish, metropolitan character. It is re-printed in *Vanity Fair* with very little editorializing: only a somewhat facetious subtitle ("A Study of Some Queer Types in New York's Latin Quarter") and a note that it comes from "the pen of a trained investigator." The investigator writes that he was motivated to test whether the "so-called broad-minded views held by bohemians of 'the village,' as this section of the city is called, are indications of perverted morals" worth pathologizing, or whether most bohemians are merely play-acting eccentricity in order to "secure notoriety." Nascher explains that his methodology has been to study esthesiomania "in its natural habitat, to live in the village as a village bohemian, as one of the class among whom [esthesiomania] was most prevalent," in order to better separate the "sham bohemians" from the "inherently erratic and unconventional," whose "eccentricities are permanent characteristics." Nascher's investigation of bohemian life, stiffened by academic distance and an obvious distaste for unconventional bohemian attitudes, proves itself a strange editorial choice for a magazine that, as Hammill and Karen Leick note, "was continually marketed in terms of novelty and making new" (178).

The inharmonious tone and attitude of Nascher's article forces us to make our own decisions about why the article is worth reading. Without any explicit guidance from the *Vanity Fair* editorial staff, our habit as readers is to begin the article in the spirit of trust. Booth remarks in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* on this natural tendency to initially trust a narrative, taking the first lines of the book of Job as an example (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 3).[34] Without knowing anything about the speaker of the narrative, we take him at his word that Job is "perfect and upright"—a faith that we rarely afford to speakers in other circumstances. That trust in a narrator's authority makes necessary Booth's first two steps for reconstructing stable irony. We rarely assume that something is ironic when we first begin to read it. Rather, when we discover an inconsistency in a text, our first impulse is to try to resolve it, extra-textually if necessary. In the case of "Esthesiomania," the text mostly leaves us alone to wonder why the article was included in the issue. Do the *Vanity Fair* editors really endorse Nascher's analysis? Do they think that his medical detachment from bohemian life will appeal to their readers? We can only resolve the cognitive dissonance that we feel upon finding this article, and trying to understand what it's saying, by either dismissing it as value-less (perhaps a planned article fell through at the last minute and the editors, in a fit of zaniness, subbed this in a the last minute) or working through the remainder of Booth's steps to discover an ironic value.

The editorial complexity of *Vanity Fair* keeps us in a constant state of having to make judgements about value as we read. There are, of course, a number of contextual reasons to not automatically trust a narrative. In the case of *Vanity Fair*, it's easy to assume that every article should be read ironically—the first step of Booth's

[34] Booth quotes the verse from the King James edition: "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (1:1).

reconstruction wouldn't be necessary because we would start reading each article by looking for the inconsistency that triggers an ironic reading. Not every article in the magazine is ironic, however. Just a few pages after the "Esthesiomania" article in the April 1919 issue, for example, is an article penned by John Jay Chapman, which makes an earnest argument for the critical importance of arts education in American universities that increasingly align their educational priorities with short-term commercial needs. Illustrated somberly with the photograph of a sculpture called "The Muse of Memory," this article contains absolutely no irony whatsoever. The position of Chapman's earnest argument in the magazine, flanked by an article that poses ludicrous etiquette conundrums and a collage of sketches illustrating how the smart set will survive the harrowing ordeal of Prohibition, exhibits the demands that *Vanity Fair* places on its readers: each new page poses a new adventure in interpretation and reminds us that we can never grow complacent in our reading habits.

Using irony in this way—as a regular but not constant device to keep readers cognisant of the evaluative demands of reading—*Vanity Fair* welcomes its readers into a middlebrow reading practice. As I've argued here, the "middleness" of middlebrow culture comes from its negotiation of multiple value perspectives and thereofre middlebrow reading is a practice that understands and embraces the multiple ways that a text can bring value.[35] Middlebrow reading requires a broader deployment of Hutcheon's ironic evaluative edge: with each page turn of an issue of *Vanity Fair*, we work to understand the value of all of the text's potential "attitudes" toward its content. While the same is true of any magazine or anthology—and of parataxic forms, in general—the

[35] See my previous discussion of Nicola Humble's "Sitting Forward and Sitting Back."

regular use of irony in *Vanity Fair* heightens the experience. By dramatizing the work of reading, irony makes readers more conscious of the judgements they make, while reading, about what an article means, why it was written, and who it is addressed to. A middlebrow reader can recognize the value that a literal reading of "Esthesiomania" might bring, using psychology to parse the strangeness of bohemian life, as well as the values of a range of ironic readings—poking fun at stuffy uptown doctors who just don't get kids these days, and at the same time poking fun at bohemians who devote themselves so fully to inscrutable behavior that others fear for their mental health. Using the both/and logic of negotiation, a middlebrow reader can allow all of these values to exist simultaneously. Looked at in this light, that ungrammatical question that Crowninshield's friend Alice asks him in his April 1914 editorial—"Who are you editing Vanity Fair for, anyway"—is not one posed by the audience to the magazine, but one that the content of the magazine poses constantly to the audience. For a magazine already engaged in negotiating the various values of cultural production, irony in *Vanity Fair* further engages readers in cultural evaluation through the very act of reading.

# CHAPTER IV

# TRADING UP FROM THE MIDDLE: PERFORMING SUCCESS IN THE TRANSITION BETWEEN CULTURES OF CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY; OR, IT'S GOOD TO BE THE EDITOR

Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington would both have made great business men—at least according to Samuel Smiles, the author of 1859's *Self-Help, With Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance*. The real key to the military success of these great generals, according to Smiles, lies not in their battle tactics but in their management savvy and attention to detail. A successful general "must possess a great tact, much knowledge of character, and ability to organize the movements of a large mass of men, whom he as to feed, clothe, and furnish with whatever may be necessary in order that they may keep the field and win the battle" (307). Napoleon, it seems, had a particular knack as a procurement manager, always ensuring an "adequate supply of saddles, ordering shoes for solders, and specifying the number of rations" (308). Not to be outdone in attention to detail, Wellington, too, micromanaged his camp, "concentrating his whole energies, from time to time, on such apparently ignominious matters as soldier's shoes, camp-kettles, biscuits, and horse-fodder" (313). Scanning history for practical guidance, Smiles confidently declares Napoleon and Wellington "both first-rate men of business," describing their success as a simple recipe for any ambitious nineteenth-century businessman to follow.

With a focus bred from either brazenness or naïveté, Smiles historicizes Napolean's success by projecting onto him the key quality of cultural formation in his

own era: character. Joan Shelley Rubin asserts that character permeated the cultural discourse of the nineteenth century. A student of Warren Susman, Rubin expands on Susman's well-trafficked distinction between character and personality to position character as a "cultural ideology" of the nineteenth century that values self-reliance and moral reflection. Character, during the genteel period, becomes synonymous with culture—or, as Rubin often redubs it, self-culture—bolstered by broad dissemination of theater, books, and lectures that emphasize the moral and aesthetic value of the reflective and autonomous self. Rubin narrates an exhaustive intellectual history of character in the nineteenth century, charting appearances of the term in Unitarian rhetoric, in developing standards of liberal higher education, in the transcendental philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and in the aesthetic theory of Matthew Arnold. Situating the ideology of character in this intellectual history, Rubin argues that, despite difference in how various thinkers define character, they were linked in their belief that culture grows from self-improvement: "genuine cultivation" in the genteel tradition is not a measure of one's wealth but of one's ability to exercise independent and reflective choice and act accordingly (4).

Rubin's intellectual history of the genteel ideology of character, however, largely ignores the concept's parallel, less moral but equally moralistic, trajectory as a marker of material success. Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* provides an early example of the popular genre of writing that largely developed that equivalency: the success manual. This genre peaked in circulation during the Gilded second half of the nineteenth century, sold door to door by subscription publishers hoping to profit from a growing and ever-more literate lower-middle class anxious for practical guidance in an era when success felt increasingly

out of the hands of the individual. In her extensive review of the genre, Judy Hilkey illustrate the remarkable demand for success manuals by noting that Orison Swett Marden's *Pushing Through the Front* was published in 250 different editions throughout the 1890s—setting Marden up for a writing career that spanned over thirty additional books and pamphlets offering advice for achieving success. Those volumes in Marden's oeuvre are hardly separate works, nor are they distinct from the hundreds of other success manuals simultaneously in circulation. As Hilkey notes, the success genre appealed to an audience craving familiarity rather than originality, and so "success writers cribbed, pirated, and plagiarized lavishly and unabashedly" (48). Most manuals follow a common formula: a handful of introductory chapters offering generic and unfocused sermons on character virtues such as adherence to duty, decorum, healthy habits, and marital devotion, followed by a series of biographical sketches of the great men of history who embodied those virtues. Despite their marketing, these manuals are not self-help books in the contemporary sense; in fact, Hilkey admits, they were "surprisingly devoid of practical, 'worldly' business advice or instruction" (49). Rather, success manuals attempt to instruct by pointing out the characteristics of past successful men, implying transitively that any man who exhibits those same characteristics will naturally see their way to success. This strategy in effect conflates success and good character, shaping a generic definition of success that spans age, class, and profession (if not gender): [36] character is

[36] I have intentionally sidelined the question of gender in this essay in order to focus on middlebrow textual performances of success, but it's true that the virtues of character explicated in Gilded Age success manuals were traditionally masculine virtues, and the genre was written primarily for a male readership. I am taking as already established the masculine anxieties inherent in the constructions of success I discuss and reserving space on the page for more interesting discussions. See Hilkey's book for an examination of the role of masculinity specifically in the success manual genre; see for a treatment of masculinity in material culture more widely, see Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996). For attention to the role of women in material culture, see Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor* (1996) and Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions* (1994).

not just "the *means* to success, but *success itself*, a non-pecuniary notion of success in which the 'worthy'—be they rich or poor, capitalist or laborer—might be joined together in a common set of beliefs about what it meant to be" successful (5). The Gilded Age success manual offers its readers a clear logic: Napoleon was a successful general (until he wasn't) and, therefore, you too can be successful if you just act the way Napoleon acted.

For this essay, I replace Rubin's moral ideology of character with a formulation of nineteenth-century character as a moral*istic* performance of success, in order to explicate middlebrow self-fashioning during the transition to a twentieth-century "culture of personality" described by Warren Susman. This transition, of course, happened gradually, creating a middle period when, in places, the two cultures occupied the same space. Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*—the text that launched the past three decades' interest in the middlebrow as a generative cultural category—locates "the terrain of middlebrow culture" in the institutional confusion, and often hypocrisy, that occurred during this period of cultural transition, mingling social values of "character and personality, autonomy and the 'social mask,' aesthetic training and information, repression and experience, democracy and elitism" (xviii, 32). Rubin is primarily interested in a "middleness" that manifests as discordance between credos while critical institutions sorted through the traces of genteel values that "survived and prospered, albeit in chastened and redirected form, throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s" (xviii). This essay builds on Rubin's impulse to locate middlebrow culture in between culture and personality but instead focuses on writers that seized the transitionary period for their own textual and material benefit.

Rather than let a good watershed moment in cultural history go to waste, to paraphrase Churchill, these savvy practitioners of success advice leveraged the middle, arbitraging the values of the old and the new, and capitalizing on the performance of character in ways that both resembled the formulas of nineteenth-century success manuals and foreshadowed the explicit performativity of success in the era of personality. In particular this essay focuses on the writing of the editors of the two most successful magazines during this collision moment of nineteenth and twentieth century cultural values: George Horace Lorimar of the *Saturday Evening Post* and Edward Bok of *Ladies' Home Journal*. Both of these men tapped into their understanding of American culture to write distinctly middlebrow success manuals that were enormously successful at the time (though now mostly forgotten), and both traded the falling cultural value of character against the emerging market of personality, deconstructing the performances inherent in American formulations of success while also strengthening their power. These two manuals, in their own distinct ways, applied a middlebrow both/and logic to the values of character and personality, morally as well as formally: they each twisted the Gilded Age success manual form into more performative genres—epistolary stories for Lorimer, autobiography for Bok—that opened up a critical middle space from which to reflect on (and profit from) the performance of success.

**Now Playing, in the Role of Character…**

Creative historicity proves a common tactic for success manual writers, beyond Samuel Smiles, who regularly project oddly specific virtues of nineteenth-century character onto the achievements of historical figures like Napoleon. William Mathews,

for example, in in his 1878 success manual *Getting on in the World: or, Hints on Success in Life*, attributes Napoleon's success on the battlefield to his punctuality. "The successful men in every calling have had a keen sense of the value of time," he writes, claiming that Napoleon's victories "were not won by consummate strategies merely, but by impressing his subordinates with the necessity of punctuality to the minute" (171). Twenty pages later, Mathews similarly praises Napoleon's resilience, chalking the general's success up "not more to his vast military genius than to his almost superhuman strength of will" (190). And, naturally, since Napoleon's character—rather than his gift for strategy—led him to success in battle, the general's infamous fall resulted from a failing of that character. "Later in his life, Napoleon was less prompt, and it was his loss of precious hours…and his inexplicable dawdling on the day after the defeat of Blecher, which contributed more than any other cause" to the fatal overthrow at Waterloo (172). Mathews's sketches of Napoleon set up a very simple equation: exercise good character, win the battle; fail in your character, and lose.

This simple equation for success appealed to readers of the late nineteenth century who felt as if their own lives were battles against forces they could neither see nor name. Mathews and other success manual writers are all too happy to shore up the battle metaphor for them, asserting that "Life is warfare: it, too, has its decisive moments of success or failure, victory or defeat" (239). In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, though, those decisive moments were seldom chosen by individuals but rather the products of large-scale industrialization and urbanization happening around them. Many of the critical events of that period contributed to an impression that the individual had lost control over his position and prospects: the standardization of time in 1883 or

consolidation of railroads later in that decade; broad swings in economic fortune, like the Wall Street Crash of 1878; violent labor unrest, such as the 1886 Haymarket bombing or the 1892 Homestead massacre. Judy Hilkey notices that the reading habits of the 1870s and '80s demonstrated readers' concern over their increasing helplessness against the faceless systems of industrialization and capitalism. In addition to success manuals, the most popular books of this period focused on how accumulation of capital would ultimately destroy the social fabric of the republic. Among these were Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), which proposes redistribution of wealth via land value tax to solve the poverty and inequality that George finds inevitably follows technological advances. Similarly, one of the top-selling fiction books of the period, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000 – 1887*, posits a utopian future where industry has been nationalized and food is distributed from free public kitchens. What these books had in common was "their belief that the new industrial order had generated ills that the lone individual was helpless to redress or overcome" (Hilkey 88). Success manuals, to the contrary, frame the battle of life as a contest that any man can win so long as he proves his mettle.

Success manuals thus reassuringly reduce struggles of life down to simple black and white terms, dialectics that equate good character with success, and success with winning and dominance—as opposed to the failure and submission that overcomes those of lesser virtue. Most success manuals explicitly lay out two possible paths for their readers, as pictured in the introductory engraving of J. Clinton Ransom's 1886 *The Successful Man in His Relations with Life* (Figure 8, next page). Styled against a background of clouds and adorned with angels, to bless the image with a biblical ethos,

**Figure 8**. "The Two Paths of Life," from Ransom's *The Successful Man* (1886).

the engraving shows two paths an innocent youth might take in his life: from Idleness to Dissipation to Total Wreck; or else through Industry to Success to Honored Age. The two paths are separated on the page by a pair of cherubs spinning a globe—one them too-eagerly clutching an hourglass in one hand and a scythe in the other—suggesting that a man must choose his side and stick to it throughout his life, before time gets the better of him and he finds himself a Total Wreck. There is no middle ground in the morality of the Gilded Age Success Manual; there is winning, and then there is everything else. Even those in the middle are losers, as Dorothy Quigley articulates in one of the very few success manuals written by a woman: "You are either a success or a failure; or you are neither one—nor the other, which is almost as bad as being a failure" (1).

Success manual writers often express this either/or taxonomy of success in terms borrowed from Marxist theory, conflating the hierarchy of class structure with the dominance of success—and providing a supposed path to class mobility. Rather than smash the capitalist order that created the class system, as Marxist radicals or political organizers would propose, success manuals posit an uncomplicated logic for working inside it. They reason that "the two great classes were not capital and labor, but rather the successful and the failures" (Hilkey 88). A man needn't understand the vast, concealed system of capital to gain entrance to the upper classes; rather, all he needs is good character and that alone will vault him toward success. This simplified capitalist narrative appealed to working and middle-class readers grasping for agency: it felt action-oriented, practical, and American.

In the success manual's formulation of capitalist agency, then, where a man can pave his own path toward the successful class with his own good character, success and

character eventually collapse into each other. The paradigm put forth by success writers was, as Hilkey puts it, one of a "class-divided society where class itself was ultimately based on a man's place in the secular moral order" (90). In the revisionist history of success manuals, Napoleon wins his battles because he demonstrates good character; regular men, too, can win the battles of life by demonstrating good character—or at least displaying it to those around him. This paradigm aligns with Warren Susman's well-known articulation of character as both a moral quality and the performance of such: "In the age of self-consciousness" that emerged throughout the nineteenth century, he writes, the concept of character "argued that its kind of self-control was the way to fullest development of moral significance of the self. But it was also a method of presenting the self to society, offering a standard of conduct that assured interrelationship between the social and the moral" (273). Character provides an external marker of a fully developed self, a way to recognize the moral success that in turn leads to financial or commercial success. The conflation sets up a convenient cause and effect, for those searching for agency in the face of emasculating social structures: if successful men are all men of character, then the key to success is to become *known* as a man of character.

Character, therefore, is also a mode of presenting oneself *as* successful—of performing success. For Susman, the cultural shift that happened around the turn of the century, particularly in America, was a move from valuing character to valuing "personality," which integrates performance as a more explicit requirement. "The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of performer. Every American was to become a performing self," demonstrating to those around them that they are valuable because they are "fascination, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing,"

etc (280, 277). In the culture of personality, success has a more obvious dependency on performance, as the valued cultural traits become, themselves, descriptions of successful performances. This shift, however, merely shines a spotlight on what was already happening behind the curtain in the culture of character. Susman is not as clear about the performative aspect of character as he is about its workings in personality but the logic of his thesis indicates that character too depended on performance of the traits valued by the dominant cultural paradigm: "citizenship, duty, democracy, work…honor, reputation, morals, manners, integrity" (273-4). However, since the opinions of others provide the proof that a man holds these traits, his position in the success class is never permanent; one must continually perform their character to others to stay on the path to success. A single slip-up like, say, arriving late to an engagement, can send one the way of Napoleon.

Highlighting the performativity inherent in both character and personality does pose problems for Susman's clean, schematic distinction between the two cultures—a distinction that has come under some fire since his original formulation of it in the mid-1980s. Andrew Heinze articulates a common critique of Susman's cultural history, and the American Studies scholarship it inspired, by accusing Susman of creating a cultural false choice between character and personality, since the two coexisted as value structures on both sides of the turn of the century. Heinze criticizes Susman for not reading the self-help texts he analyzes closely enough; closer reading "suggests, *contra* Susman, that character and personality often referred to the same constellation of qualities, and that the theme of personal magnetism was neither a novelty of the twentieth century nor a call for a 'performing self'" (231). Heinze is justified in problematizing the

Susman's sanitary divide between character and personality, and correct to call attention to how the social mechanics of each functioned similarly. However, rather than equalize the two cultures by downplaying the "performing self" called for by the culture of personality, I argue instead that both cultures called for a performance of values. The culture of character, however, with its insistence on autonomy in the face of frightening social externalities, required a certain cultivated ignorance of its own performance

What shifted, rather, to mark a divide between the two cultures, was a change in the material culture of the United States that occurred throughout the closing of the nineteenth century and opening of the twentieth century, which impacted how readers and audiences responded to success. Aaron Jaffe and Jonathan Goldman, part of a close cadre of contemporary scholars who investigate the workings of celebrity in the modernist period, have done significant work to formulate the performances of identity undertaken by successful artists at the height of the culture of personality. In a period of cultural consumption on a mass scale never before seen, spectatorship wrested the identities of famous people away from them, turning celebrities into "capacious semiosis banks, powerful simulacra worked by remote control" by the culture industries (Jaffe and Goldman 8). Modernist authors, and others savvy to the textual quality of identity, projected intentionally aestheticized versions of themselves in attempts to maintain some amount of agency. As Aaron Jaffe has continually postulated in his work, "celebrity is…authorial/literary self-fashioning *in extremis*" and aestheticized modernist writing style was "a means of self-production within the text that accompanies, and in fact supersedes, the self-production of marketing and promotional activities" (Jaffe and Goldman 9-10). By the interwar period, the emergence of celebrity culture, of modes of

cultural consumption that fed on gossip and behind-the-scenes glimpses of the rarefied lives of artists, automatically fetishized the identities of cultural producers. The shift from character to personality primarily marked a change in how artists leaned in to the performances that consumer culture demanded of them. Middlebrow writers, however, bridged this divide between celebrity culture and the either/or logic of success rooted in the character ethics of the late nineteenth century. And it was from atop this bridge that George Horace Lorimer and Edward Bok, already wildly successful middlemen of American culture, offered some advice of their own.

**Playing Success to the Letter**

Providing advice was a lifelong project for George Horace Lorimer, as the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* from 1899 to 1936. Under Lorimer's firm direction, the contents of any given issue of the *Post* index a version of America where hard-working men can build success out of the raw materials of good character and common sense. Jan Cohn's sweeping scholarship on Lorimer's life argues that he wielded the magazine as "an instrument to shape society," curating in its pages a version of America that was "mapped, intelligible, and full of promise" (6). Lorimer helmed the *Post* during an era of significant standardization—industrial, commercial, even temporal—and, as Cohn puts it, Lorimer knew the power that the *Post's* massive circulation gave it to standardize the country's sense of self. The stories and articles included in each issue of the magazine, therefore, were all "partners in the job of constructing America for the *Post* audience," each article or story contributing to the work of imagining America as a modern

landscape still clearly navigable through the kind of advice found in a Gilded Age success manual (7).

When Lorimer took his own turn at penning success advice, though, the result betrayed a more complex relationship with American culture than Cohn reads in the pages of the *Post*. During the first decade of his editorship, before the *Post* had developed enough of a brand that Lorimer was turning down stories from the up-and-coming William Faulkner,[37] Lorimer himself wrote a series of advice stories to beef up his pages. Or perhaps "pork up" would be more appropriate: the stories were a series of letters from a self-made pork-packer named John Graham to his young-adult son Pierrepont. A sales agent prospectus from 1900 establishes the bona fides of Lorimer's epistolary stories within the advice genre, listing it among other forthcoming content offering advice from successful businessmen, and promising the letters to be "brim full of business wisdom, snappily expressed" ("Sales Prospectus"). The first story appears on the op-ed page of the *Post* in the August 3, 1901 issue and, within a year, Lorimer strikes a deal to publish the full collection of syndicated letters in a single volume. The first twenty letters were published together in 1902 under a title that, in its full verbosity, gives a glimpse into the winking tone Lorimer took while writing: *Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son (Being the Letters Written by John Graham, Head of the House of Graham & Company, Pork-Packers of Chicago, Familiarly Known on 'Change as 'Old Gorgon Graham,' to His Son, Pierrepont, Facetiously Known to His Intimates as 'Piggy.'* The title betrays a new twist on the advice genre, a self-aware play on the earnestness of the success

[37] Neither here nor there for the purposes of this argument but great for trivia: after Lorimer rejected the first story Faulkner ever submitted to the *Post*, Faulkner wrote back with another submission and warned in his sign-off, "And hark in your ear: I am a coming man, so take warning." 21 Dec 1927.

manual. Each letter in the collection does indeed provide a thinly fictionalized take on the same didacticism found in more explicit success manuals. The form and tone of each letter, however, simultaneously pokes fun at the self-righteous persona of the Gilded Age advice-giver.

In the first letter Lorimer published, Pierrepont has just moved away to start college at Harvard, and his father writes to ensure that his son sticks to his studies but doesn't let them go to his head. Graham preaches to Pierrepont, making liberal use of pork-related metaphors, about the importance of sticking to his values no matter what he's learning in school: "You can cure a ham in dry salt and you can cure it in sweet pickle, and when you're through you've got pretty good eating either way, provided you started in with a sound ham" (3). The letters continue to follow Pierrepont through his education, an ill-advised post-college grand tour, a hapless period in the mailroom to start his career, and up through the ranks of his father's firm. Each letter in the collection follows the same template: Graham has learned something of his son's activities that has either alarmed or encouraged him, and he extends two thousand words of unsolicited advice based on his own experiences in the hard-scrabble world of business. The letters wind circuitously through a series of anecdotes, each more tenuously connected than the last to Graham's original reason for writing. Each letter then ends abruptly, without any clear connection to the moral, as if Graham has simply run out of time to keep writing.

The thirteenth letter in the series provides a good model of the Old Gorgon Graham School of Advice. Pierrepont is midway through his career, now on the road as a salesman for his father's meat products, and he has seen enough success in this role to catch his father's attention. The subtitle of the letter indicates, though, that Graham is not

the kind of father who gives his praise away for free: “Mr. Pierrepont’s orders have been looking up, so the old man gives him a pat on the back—but not too hard a one” (176). Graham’s primary advice to his son is that a successful man at this point in his career should *look* like a successful man—but the right kind of successful. Graham congratulates his son on making a big order and encourages him to buy a new suit, but also warns that Pierrepont should “get something that won’t keep people guessing whether you follow horses or do buck and wing dancing for a living” (177). Especially for a young man trying to stake his claim in a competitive world, it’s important to show that you’re honest and put-together so that others will want to do business with you. The ensuing anecdotes spiral ever loosely around this theme, connecting character ethics and business sense to cutting a clean figure. Graham warns his son that someone is always watching him by telling of a time he hazed a tobacco-chewing mail clerk, spending a full hour inspecting the mail room while the kid tries to hold the plug under his tongue without turning green. He then transitions to a site-visit made by John L. Sullivan—the first heavyweight boxing champion—who distracts so many workers with his fine suit that the stockyard shuts down for an afternoon. Graham’s moral for this second story is that the right suit can amplify a man’s success: “John looked his job, and you didn’t have to explain to the men that he was the real thing in prize fighters” (183). But Pierrepont shouldn’t himself be so easily convinced by appearances, Graham cautions, with a story about a well-trimmed salesman working under him who convinced the old man to spot him fifty dollars to cover expenses, and then used the money to skip out on eight-hundred dollars of uncollected orders. “Appearances are deceitful, I know,” Graham tempers his advice, “but so long as they are, there’s nothing like having them deceive for us instead

of against us" (178). The letter ends abruptly, without tying its strings together, as they all do, leaving a final formula of mixed equivalencies: men of good character can bolster their success by dressing well, and men of bad character can manipulate others by dressing well, but men of good character will always see through the deception—but can also harness it to amplify their own good character.

The structural elements of Graham's storytelling style further reinforce his circuitous logic. In the moments when he does bring his stories to a point, he does so by cobbling together precarious rhetorical constructions that threaten to collapse in on themselves. He has a habit, for example of close-reading commonsense sayings with a businessman's literalness, in order to connect them to other commonsense sayings—as if uncovering the system of ligaments connecting the whole body of American aphorism. "Of course, clothes don't make the man," he concludes his sartorial advice, "but they make all of him except his hands and face during business hours, and that's a pretty considerable area of the human animal. A dirty shirt may hide a pure heart, but it seldom covers a clean skin" (177). Graham has a true gasbag's gift for bringing two otherwise opposing statements into agreement and his reasoning, while not the sturdiest, has at least the appearance of sensibleness.

Other times, though, Graham embarks on extended metaphors that don't quite reach their destination, exposing clues to the broader agenda of his letter-writing. It's impossible to convey Graham's absurdist metaphorical wisdom without quoting an example in full:

> A man doesn't snap up a horse just because he looks all right. As a usual thing that only makes him wonder what really is the matter that the other fellow wants

> to sell. So he leads the nag out into the middle of a ten-acre lot, where the light will strike him good and strong, and examines every hair of his hide, as if he expected to find it near-seal, or some other base imitation; and he squints under each hoof for the grand hailing sign of distress; and he peeks down his throat for dark secrets. If the horse passes this degree the buyer drives him twenty or thirty miles, expecting him to turn out a roarer, or to find that he balks, or shies, or goes lame, or develops some other horse nonsense. If after all that there are no bad symptoms, he offers fifty less than the price asked, on general principles, and for fear he has missed something. Take men and horses, by and large, and they run pretty much the same. There's nothing like trying a man in harness a while before you bind yourself to travel with him very far. (185)

All this to say, simply, that a good businessman does his due diligence rather than trusting appearances, whether in striking a deal or finding a partner. Rather than say it outright, though, Graham attempts to establish a folksy ethos for his advice, relating it to an experience to which his audience can perhaps relate. That question of audience, however, undermines the whole charade of Graham's advice-giving. His muddled expression of the metaphor troubles its down-to-earth positioning. The symptoms for which he searches the horse, for example, are both vague and unfelicitous, checking for "dark secrets" and comparing its hide to seal skin. Graham also clearly reaches the end of his horse knowledge toward the end of the metaphor, chalking up any other alarming thing one might find about a horse to "horse nonsense." It seems clear that Graham himself has little experience with horse buying himself, which means that his supposed audience—his upwardly mobile son—likely has even less. The shabby assembly of

Graham's metaphor can't support the fourth wall: he knows that he's preaching to a wider audience than just his son, and therefore must include anecdotes that might feel relatable to, let's say, an average reader of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Graham himself, therefore, is an amateur advice writer in search of broader circulation—perhaps simply settling for the captive audience he has in his son, or perhaps in on the knowledge that his letters are getting published in a mass-market magazine.

**A Successful Parody**

In writing a character who is writing a success manual, Lorimer both dispenses advice and lays bare the underlying mechanics of advice-giving, drawing attention to the performance of character inherent in representing success in the context of turn-of-the-century American capitalism. The self-made Graham performs all of the indicators of character that Susman outlines: he variously advises his son to embrace the values of work, duty, reputation, manners, and integrity, while also demonstrating his own proficiency with those values through stories of his past experiences in business. In his storytelling style, though, he also represents a caricature of the type of man who would self-consciously demonstrate those values.

*Letters from a Self-Made Merchant*, therefore, doesn't just participate in the success manual tradition but also uses parody to critique it—a form of twentieth-century parody that constructs texts rather than breaks them down. Parody has been the genre *a la mode* during a number of literary eras, handy for speaking truth to power or calling out the silliness of new cultural trends. It has also often, during these eras, been condemned as a derivative and derogatory form of writing: F. R. Leavis famously despised parody,

writing in *The Spectator* in 1962 that parody was usually practiced by smug literary poseurs and "is always the worst enemy of creative genius and vital originality." Despite Leavis's (perhaps oversensitive) protestation, he lived and wrote during an era that incubated a particularly powerful strain of self-reflexive parody. Linda Hutcheon, in her survey of twentieth-century parodic form, remarks that modernist and early post-modernist art "increasingly appeared to distrust external criticism to the extent that they have sought to incorporate critical commentary within their own structures in a kind of self-legitimizing short-circuit of the normal critical dialog" (*Theory of Parody* 1). Writers throughout the twentieth century have taken on the double work of creating and critiquing, rather than trust the latter role to an external critical machinery they deemed, for various reasons ranging from trauma to lack of representation, unequipped for the job.

Parody achieves this double work by repeating from an original text but creating a critical distance in which critical evaluation can happen. Hutcheon explains that the need for distance makes *difference* the most instrumental element of parody, rather than the quality or truthfulness of its imitation. The difference in a parodic text, more so than in other double-forms like irony or allusion, engages with another modernist and post-modernist obsession: the interplay of the present and the past. Parody gains additional potency in periods of change and tumult because it necessarily includes the past within itself, reproduces the past while projecting something wholly new onto it. Hutcheon describes the workings of parody as if it were a kind of theatrical production, like live actors in front of a showing of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (the *Inception* of parodies): the original text stands in the background, a constant and steady backdrop against which the action of the parodic text can be compared. Sometimes the actors mimic the

movement on the screen as closely as they can; sometimes they play against it; at times, they go off to their own place altogether. The audience both measures and understands the original text through the differences between what happens on and off-screen, as it were. In particular, the parody emphasizes the literariness of the original text—how and why it has been constructed *as* a text—by dramatizing, as Hutcheon puts it, that literariness in differences that articulate the space between the "parodic foreground and the parodied background" as a space of play and critique (*Theory of Parody* 31).

That critical space allows for much richer and more layered critiques than mere ridicule. Like irony, parody operates on both a literal surface level and a subtextual level that twists around the meaning of the surface level. However, irony, and particularly structural irony, buries the implied meaning in contextual clues frequently found beyond the text itself, or seals it within a knowing tone that relies on a certain profile of reader to unlock. Since parody contains the original text within itself, its two halves are openly at play with one another. As I've discussed elsewhere, irony makes meaning from a middle constructed as both/and: ironic meaning is both literal and implied, both internal and external, both frank and winking.[38] Parodic meaning is similarly both literal and implied but, by placing its ethos entirely within the text, parody extends its both/and middleness to the purpose of its critique. Parodic critique can confront its original text with both disappointment and enjoyment, both deconstruction and homage, both separation from the past and acknowledgement of the role the past plays in the present.

Through the lens of parody, we can see Lorimer's portrait of Graham as both a caricature and a model. Graham exemplifies the advice-giver of the Gilded-age past: a

[38] See chapter III.

gasbag patriarch dispensing advice chockablock with potent quotables twisted out of the pages of advice books he's skimmed, taken to overdrawn metaphors that end in incomprehensible morals, all wind up and no follow-through. However, Lorimer certainly did not write Graham as purely sarcastic. If his Graham letters had appeared in *The Smart Set,* or two decades later in *Vanity Fair*, we could rest easier in reading the portrayal as a clever pantomime of the self-righteous figure of the American businessman. The context of the *Saturday Evening Post* disrupts the simplicity of that reading. As Cohn has written, Lorimer-as-editor maintained authoritarian control over the contents of the *Post*, using it to consciously shape an ideology of common sense exemplified by the figure of the hard-working businessman of good character. This "culture of the *Post*," in Cohn's words, was pointillistically portrayed through the contents that Lorimer, famously, insisted that he always review and sign off on himself, for every single issue: "westerns, historical romances, sports fiction were all spun out of the collective web of a comprehensible society…built on fair play and individual initiative and common sense" (7). Cohn points out that this web was also what attracted advertisers; in an era of media before advertising itself had come fully enough into power to dictate content, the entire business model of the *Post* relied on Lorimer's uncanny ability to sniff out what would appeal to the market he was both entertaining and shaping. The sales figures for *Letters from a Self-Made Merchant* further underline this point: the collection of letters became a best-seller and, according to John Tebbel, was translated into more languages that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Tebbel, 30). Even Senator Albert Beveridge, who by 1903 had become a regular *Post* contributor but was not yet the thirty-year friend and confidante he would become to Lorimer, complained that he was the one

writing about "the great and eternal things, and here is the editor with his bloody old pork-packing wisdom actually getting famous" (Beveridge "Letter to George Horace Lorimer"). Lorimer knew that business advice sold, and sold well, and also believed in the world of success sold *by* that business advice. It makes little sense, then, that he would undermine his values as well as his bottom line by publishing mocking stories narrated by a straight-ahead buffoon.

Lorimer's biographers, however—including Cohn—never give him enough credit for being funny, nor for his grasp on the utility of humor. Lorimer's personal letters, though, reveal him to have tempered his editorial firmness with a dry wit that both ingratiated him to writers and smoothed over his rejections of their work. In a June 1914 letter to Edna Ferber, who signed her telegraphs "ESF," he happily accepted a submission by telling her that the S in her initials "stands for slow. And now that I have read what you have in hand for us, I wish more than ever that you would change your middle name to stories" (Lorimer "Letter to Edna Ferber" 4 June 1914). Eighteen months later, he employs the same charm to tell her that he isn't going to pay her any more money for the stories they accept: "Though we liked your story, we didn't like it $1500 worth. I can only repeat that I am a great admirer of your work, have liked almost everything that you have ever written and I am prepared to flirt with you at any time that you wave the handkerchief" (Lorimer "Letter to Edna Ferber" 15 Dec 1916).

Perhaps *because* he was so dry, Lorimer understood that cleverness demands a certain audience—and that audience wasn't his. When it came to the *Post's* contents, Lorimer created firm distinctions between humor that would work and humor that was too subtle. On the one hand, it was Lorimer who identified the potential in Ring

Lardner's gently satirical baseball stories, even when Lardner's home publication, *The Chicago Tribune*, had rejected the vernacular writing style as too unorthodox (Robinson 68). As Merritt Mosely has pointed out, Lardner's early work for the *Post* does not have the satiric edge of his later stories (44). When Lardner's humor began to run too dry, Lorimer was quick to let him know. In 1922, Lorimer's associate editor, Thomas Costain, wrote Lardner a rejection of "The Golden Honeymoon"; Lorimer was home sick with flu but still reviewing content, and had deemed the humor in the story "so quiet that he is afraid the average reader would miss it" (Costain "Letter to Ring Lardner" 6 Mar 1922). Lardner published the story in *Cosmopolitan* later that year and never placed another story in the *Post*, despite regular missives from Lorimer asking for him to write about football, or anything else, in his "well known josh style" ("Letter to Ring Lardner" 21 Feb 1922). Lorimer had a strong sense for the kind of straight-ahead humor that complimented his common-sense construction of America, and there was no place in that line-up for sarcasm or ridicule.

Parody, however, allows Lorimer to work both ends toward the middle—or *in* the middle, rather. The parodic backdrop of *Letters from a Self-Made Merchant* is the success narrative that undergirds the success manual genre, as well as the editorial ethos of *The Saturday Evening Post*: the belief that hard-work and good morals are all a man needs to make gains in life. In front of that backdrop, however, Lorimer dramatizes the performativity of success compelled within the culture of character. And while Graham delivers his messages with a lampooned bombast, the values of good character he advocates do have a certain impact—and would particularly for a *Saturday Evening Post* audience. Although admittedly a strange comparison, Old Gorgan Graham's relationship

to Gilded Age character is similar to, in another form of parodic performance, a drag queen's relationship to femininity. Pamela Robertson, in her work on feminist camp, argues that drag presents both an homage to and a deconstruction of essentialist visions of the female form. "What gender parody takes as its object is not the image of the woman, but the idea…that an essentially female identity exists prior to the image" (12). Drag both participates in and exposes the joke of gender essentialism. *Letters from a Self-Made Merchant* similarly drags the essentialism of success in the Gilded Age culture of character. The text participates fully in the constructed identity of the successful man, not only through Graham's narrative sincerity but also through Lorimer's earnest editorial project; at the same time, the playful tone with which the letters are written draw attention to the silliness of that identity, lampooning the affectations of those who perform character.

**Would the Real Edward Bok Please Stand Up**

Nearly a decade before Lorimer tried his hand at success writing, the other editorial star of the Curtis Publishing empire, Edward Bok, was already a veritable child prodigy in the success manual genre. In 1895, at the ripe age of 32 and already six years into his stint as editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, Bok published his own manual, *Successward*, followed by a lecture tour in 1898. With this book and tour, Bok found his niche as a successful young man addressing other aspiring young men. He begins his speech by recounting a story of a young man who approaches Chauncey Depew, the senator and former president of the New York Central Railroad System, and asks him to share the secret to his success. Mr. Depew's response is as dissatisfying as it is aphoristic:

"My boy, there is no secret to it. It is just dig, dig, dig" (Bok "Keys" 96). In this anecdote are all the seeds of what would become Bok's own success-guru stylistics: an emphasis on persistence as the ultimate and primary element of the successful character, name-dropping to undergird his own authenticity on the subject of success, and a heavy hand with the paternalistic moralizing.

These seeds were fully cultivated by the end of Bok's editorial career, when he published his more lauded entry into the success literature canon. *The Americanization of Edward Bok* embeds success manual moralizing into the form of an autobiography, charting Bok's life from his arrival in the U.S. at age six through the present moment of his writing, in 1919. Published in 1920, the book won Bok a Pulitzer Prize for autobiography in 1921. Despite that Pulitzer, though, *The Americanization* has been sparsely treated by critics, often meriting only a brief mention in Bok's biographies and judged not as a text on its own but as an extension of the man himself. Helen Damon-Moore, for example, calls the autobiography a "relentlessly cheerful, moralistic, and prescriptive reflection on success"—an echo of the pedantry and ego that Damon-Moore argues pervaded Bok's entire editorship of *Ladies' Home Journal* (62).

Although *The Americanization* claims, in title and in Bok's introduction, to chronicle Bok's acculturation to America, particularly to the rough and tumble culture of capitalist meritocracy, this process of transformation is at best a loose theme, even more loosely explicated. Rather, the book resembles in form a hybrid of bootstraps narrative and epic: each chapter details some circumstance in which Bok rises above his circumstances by leveraging a relationship with a famous person, applying a tireless persistence to a market need he's identified, or, often, a combination of the both. Whether

selling water on the train to tired, mid-summer commuters or starting a newspaper syndicate by circulating transcripts of the sermons of Henry Beecher Ward, the autobiographical Bok chases his naïve understanding of capitalism to a bafflingly perfect record of achievement. If Bok sees a need, he finds a way to charge people for filling it; if Bok realizes a thing is valuable, he will seek to replicate its value as many times as possible; and, in Bok's philosophy, systemic challenges like sexism are merely unrecognized market opportunities.

The formal element that really distinguishes *The Americanization*, however, is its use of third-person narrative to split the author-narrator Bok from the character of a successful editor about which he writes. Bok explains in his introduction that writing in the third person felt to him "the most reflective method" of exploring his life's story (viii), allowing him to both gain perspective on his own success and to set up, at times, conflict with the version of himself that opted for commercial success against his other instincts. Narrator-Bok introduces this distance in the preface to the book with an illustration straight out of *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr Hyde*: "I have again and again found myself watching with intense interest the Edward Bok of this book at work. I have, in turn, applauded him and criticized him, as I do in this book…His tastes, his outlook, his manner of looking at things were totally at variance with my own" (vii). There was no other option but to write in the third person, he concludes, because editor-Bok's point of view is entirely foreign to narrator-Bok, who claims to have no more insight into the editor's interiority than any other outside observer.

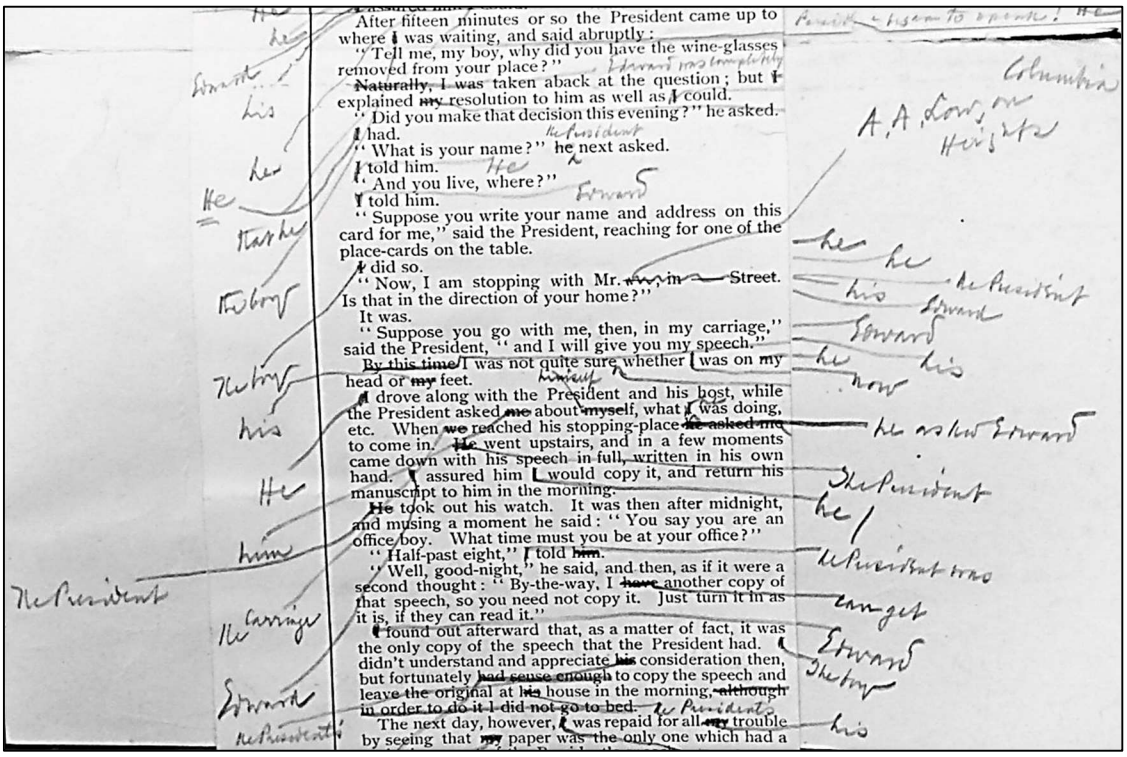
Beyond the narrative device, the distance between narrator-Bok and the character of editor-Bok recurs at key points in the story when Bok makes a commercial misstep.

Editor-Bok is the one with a mercenary aptitude for identifying editorial gimmicks that will attract more readers from his prime housewife demographic—features, for example, of pictures taken from the inside of people's homes, or full-color reproductions of artwork from the Whitney Museum. Narrator-Bok expresses ambivalence to this populist approach, explaining that he keeps his opinions under wraps for the good of the magazine: "The man behind the editor knew that if he followed his own personal tastes and expressed them in his magazine, a limited audience would be his instead of the enormous clientele that he was now reaching" (377). Later in his career, however, narrator-Bok makes a quick play for dominance, scheming to develop a new magazine more in tune with his personal taste. When Robert Underwood Johnson retired as editor of *The Century*, in 1913, Bok saw an opportunity to run a periodical with a history as a serious non-illustrated magazine that he could revive with "the new progressive, modern spirit" into a modern thinking-man's periodical to rival *The Atlantic*. Bok mocked up six prospective issues to pitch the purchase of *The Century* to Cyrus Curtis, who responded that editing both *Ladies' Home Journal* and *The Century* would equate to "a division of public association" (379). In the power struggle between his divided selves, editor-Bok ultimately won the day—though narrator-Bok, truly the final arbiter, sneaks a dose of bitterness into his conclusion to the story, remarking that "for some wise reason, undoubtedly—the real Edward Bok was subdued. He went back into the bottle!" (379).

Although George Lorimer's comedic deftness makes his own thinly fictionalized success manual a more interesting study in the structures of parodic doubleness, Bok's narrative split produces a text with almost dizzying spirals of intertextuality. Ostensibly, the third-person narration seems to neatly divide Bok's intellectual persona from the man

of success—an "Americanized" character whose agency and power over the "real Edward Bok" derived from the necessities of survival in the marketplace. Narrator-Bok, however, it no less a construction. In his preface, narrator-Bok proclaims the demise of the editor character, exorcised like a capitalist demon upon Bok's retirement from the *Journal*: "There are no longer two personalities. The Edward Bok of whom I have written has passed out of my being as completely as if he had never been there, save for the records and files on my library shelves" (viii). Narrator-Bok would have us believe that he now sits, writing quietly in his study, chronicling the adventures of his other self with the distance of pure and objective intellectual interest. In reality, Edward Bok-the-author (the *real* real Bok) did very little of the writing of *The Americanization* upon his retirement in 1919, though; the bulk of the volume was written at various points throughout his career and published as anonymous stories in the *Journal*, particularly in the early decades of the magazine. Almost certainly inspired by the success of *The Education of Henry Adams,* which itself took the Pulitzer for autobiography in 1919, Bok made a clearly after-the-fact decision to convert his book into a third-person perspective. The original manuscript of *The Americanization* comprises pages of articles clipped out of old *Journal* issues, glued onto the manuscript page, and edited to replace every single first-person pronoun (Figure 9, next page). The result is a meticulous editorial defacement, literally and narratively—an intentional act of disowning personal experiences that Bok had once chosen to write in first person, and dropping them into a separate life. One of Bok's biographers, Hans Krabbendam, has written that Bok's life perfectly occupies the moment of overlap between the cultures of character and personality, and that "studying Edward Bok enables us to explore shifting components of

**Figure 9.** Page from the manuscript of *The Americanization of Edward Bok*, found in Bok's papers at the Library of Congress.



After fifteen minutes or so the President came up to where I was waiting, and said abruptly:

"Tell me, my boy, why did you have the wine-glasses removed from your place?"

Naturally, I was taken aback at the question; but I explained my resolution to him as well as I could.

"Did you make that decision this evening?" he asked.

I had.

"What is your name?" he next asked.

I told him.

"And you live, where?"

I told him.

"Suppose you write your name and address on this card for me," said the President, reaching for one of the place-cards on the table.

I did so.

"Now, I am stopping with Mr. ~~www~~ in ~~—~~ Street. Is that in the direction of your home?"

It was.

"Suppose you go with me, then, in my carriage," said the President, "and I will give you my speech."

By this time I was not quite sure whether I was on my head or ~~my~~ feet.

I drove along with the President and his host, while the President asked ~~me~~ about ~~myself~~, what I was doing, etc. When ~~we~~ reached his stopping-place ~~he asked me~~ to come in. ~~He~~ went upstairs, and in a few moments came down with his speech in full, written in his own hand. I assured him I would copy it, and return his manuscript to him in the morning.

~~He~~ took out his watch. It was then after midnight, and musing a moment he said: "You say you are an office boy. What time must you be at your office?"

"Half-past eight," I told ~~him~~.

"Well, good-night," he said, and then, as if it were a second thought: "By-the-way, I ~~have~~ another copy of that speech, so you need not copy it. Just turn it in as it is, if they can read it."

I found out afterward that, as a matter of fact, it was the only copy of the speech that the President had. I didn't understand and appreciate ~~his~~ consideration then, but fortunately ~~had sense enough~~ to copy the speech and leave the original at ~~his~~ house in the morning, ~~although in order to do it I did not go to bed.~~

The next day, however, I was repaid for all ~~my~~ trouble by seeing that ~~my~~ paper was the only one which had a

this consciousness," of character in an emerging culture of personality, "because he became increasingly occupied with his public image" (Krabbendam 9). The manuscript of *The Americanization* shows the exact mechanics of that occupation: Bok divvies up the events of his life in order to make textual space for a character, narrator-Bok, who in turn had narrative agency to shape the public image of editor-Bok. Bok's decision to create a separate narrator-character for his autobiography transforms a fantastical but otherwise unremarkable—and rather insufferable—collection of stories into a multi-level parodic layering of the cultures of personality and success by playing the generic conventions of autobiography and advice against each other.

The autobiographical form is already rich in this layering potential, even without Bok's theatrics, and it's here that Loren Glass, who has paid the only substantive critical

attention to *The Americanization* throughout the past century, attempts to untangle some of Bok's formal knots. Glass belongs to a tight coterie of contemporary scholars, also including Aaron Jaffe and Faye Hammill, interested in diagramming the mechanics of celebrity in twentieth-century literary culture, and he begins with a discussion of celebrity as a concept in which the identity of a famous person is detached from the person himself, fetishized, and placed into circulation in a market of exchange. Glass contends, however, that the cults of personality that develop around celebrity authors, particularly during the modernist period, disrupt the neatness of celebrity distance, and that autobiography, as a genre, provides a perfect site for investigating that the tension between, as he puts it, "impersonality and personality" (5). Building on Jaffe's groundwork, Glass comments that, for modernist authors, "personality continued to function as a factor in the literary field…Certainly Eliot's own gaunt, vampiric pose and high-priestly charisma became tightly associated with his critical and poetic style as his fame and influence increased" (6). That is, the fame maintained by Modernist authors conflated their stylistics and their public personalities, granting them some modicum of continued agency over their identities—in effect, they co-wrote their celebrity personas alongside their fans. Autobiography, generically, enforces a similar tension—erasing the author while also underlining him—through its reliance on what Phillipe Lejeune calls "the autobiographical pact": the assurance to the reader that the subject of the book and its narrator share the name on the cover.

Writing in the historical and cultural middle, and engaging himself in the fetishization of self that celebrity reserves for the audience, Bok layers additional complexity on the workings of personality that Glass describes. But Glass uses the word

"personality" in a slippery way. Although he only refers obliquely to Susman's theory of cultural change from character to personality, Glass obviously relies on Susman for a theoretical foundation. On one hand, Glass does use the term personality to indicate the phenomenon Susman describes, referring both to the qualities and traits that make a person successful in the culture of personality as well as to the performance of those qualities and traits. In addition to those interlocking Susmanian meanings, though, Glass also uses the term personality to refer to both the "actual person" behind a text—the subjectivity of the author-function—as well as to the fetishized image of that person that circulates among fans. For those keeping score then, "personality" interchangeably refers to the complex of psychological traits that identifies an author as a person ("I could really get a sense of his personality"); to the character that celebrity makes out of those traits ("He's an on-screen personality"); to the marker of success in early twentieth century culture, and arguable beyond ("He's got so much personality); and to the process of performing that position of success ("He's a real comedic personality"). We could construe this conflation as a critical error on Glass's part or, in the context of Bok's autobiography, understand this linguistic Cerberus as a purposeful acknowledgement of—and attempt toward unraveling—Bok's own multifarious personality. The Edward Bok of *The Americanization of Edward Bok* is a personality all at once essential but constructed, controlled but circulated, auratic but also reproducible.

**(As)signing the Value of Success**

Not only does Edward Bok—and "Edward Bok"—embody a multivalent definition of personality, he thrived within multiple and multi-dimensional cultures of

success all at once: living, mediating, and performing character in an era of personality. The primary job of an editor, particularly an editor of a high-circulation, mass-market magazine, is to reshape writing for commercial means, shifting the value of a piece of writing from the text itself to its circulation value. Arguably, no piece of writing has value beyond its audience, but the commercial realities of magazine publishing explicitly commoditize writing, quantifying its worth with distinct exchange values. As the editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, Bok's success relied on his ability to trade on the tension of personality, turning the stories and writing of private individuals into marketable print products, and creating personalities by putting their expression into circulation.

In *The Americanization*, Bok applies this same prowess to his own identity, commoditizing his identity—his personality—by repeating his proper name constantly throughout the text. Through sheer force of repetition, the signifier "Edward Bok" dissociates from the man himself and enters a realm of narrative circulation. Loren Glass argues that such an obvious foregrounding of the autobiographical subject as a commodity exposes the artifice of the autobiographical pact. The reader of an autobiography is meant to pretend that they are reading the true-life events of the author, sharing the author's consciousness and private life. In fact, private thoughts and details are often the selling the point of an autobiography. By writing his autobiography in the third person, Bok exposes the autobiography's core function as that of, essentially, putting personality on sale by making the private public.

*The Americanization*, of course, has multiple Boks to put into circulation; it does not merely to expose the pretense of the autobiographical pact but rather uses autobiography's dramatization of self to set up a market of exchange between various

performances of success. *The Americanization* parodies the mechanics of autobiography, to be sure: Bok both writes an autobiography and exposes the literariness of it, participating in while also deconstructing the performance of personality (or personalities). But *The Americanization* is also a success manual. The story of Bok's success regularly provides a platform for narrator-Bok to preach about how to achieve success, in general—a privileged role he'd already migrated from the success lecture circuit of the 1890s to the pages of his magazine.[39] Despite narrator-Bok's occasional critique of editor-Bok's mercenary instincts, *The Americanization* imbues editor-Bok with Gilded Age character *par excellence*: he is frugal, savvy, unflagging, punctual, unsentimental. While the autobiographical form provides Bok a stage to rehearse and project layered versions of personality, the success manual form provides Bok a mechanism for selling tickets to that production.

As narrator-Bok recounts the adventures and celebrity run-ins of his editorial alter ego, he demonstrates an entrepreneurial savvy of his own, exposing the performative aspects of character to show—and profit from—the actuality that character can itself be a type of personality. The first several chapters of *The Americanization* describe how Bok gained some notoriety as a teenaged autograph collector, and how he then capitalized further on that fame to start his editorial career. As Glass notes, Bok understands from a young age, intuitively, the "emergent social value of celebrity" in the late nineteenth century (40). He also quickly comes to understand that certain qualities of character will

[39] Helen Damon-Moore has discussed this migration at length, concluding firmly that Bok was himself a paternalistic gasbag who ultimately did more harm than good to women's position in American culture: "Bok's editorials frequently bordered on dogmatic. Bok was pendantic no matter whom he addressed: his wide range of writings published outside the *Journal*, speaking to mena dn women, young and old, rich and poor alike, featured without exception the same patronizing tone…If Bok's preachiness was not consciously sexist, however, it set a tone for the *Journal* that eventually made the magazine a sexist publication…Bok lectured, scolded, and patronized women" (71).

gain him entrance into the presence of successful people: he manages to earn the time and pens of a striking assemblage of nineteenth-century celebrities by demonstrating to them that he is an upstanding young man with just the right amount of pluck and initiative. Bok started his autograph collection in 1880, as a seventeen year-old hoping to continue his studies after finishing school. As the story is written in *The Americanization*, Bok reads about General James Garfield in an encyclopedia and wants to find out more. He writes a letter to the General and immediately receives one back. Bok's father informs him that he's just received a a valuable memento and, applying what would become characteristic Bok logic to the situation, Bok concludes that "if one letter was valuable, how much more valuable would be a hundred!" (18). He proceeds on a letter-writing campaign, and to hounds celebrities who he reads in the newspaper are visiting New York, resulting in a collection of signatures from most famous political and military figures of the decade—Grant, Sherman, Mary Todd Lincoln, even Jefferson Davis—and warrants a local interest article written about him in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle.*

Young Bok instinctively develops his hobby into a trade, turning the proper names of successful people into currency to gain more names—and eventually to commercialize his own proper name. After the *Eagle* story runs, Bok uses his connection to the newspaper to secure an office position there, and wrangle the occasional reporting assignment. In December of 1880, Bok receives an assignment to attend a dinner of the New England Society to transcribe, for print in the newspaper, keynote speeches from Generals Grant and Sherman and then-President Rutherford Hayes. The young Bok finds that he can't write quickly enough to keep up with the president's quick pace of delivery, and so "Edward resolutely sought the President…and explained it was his first important

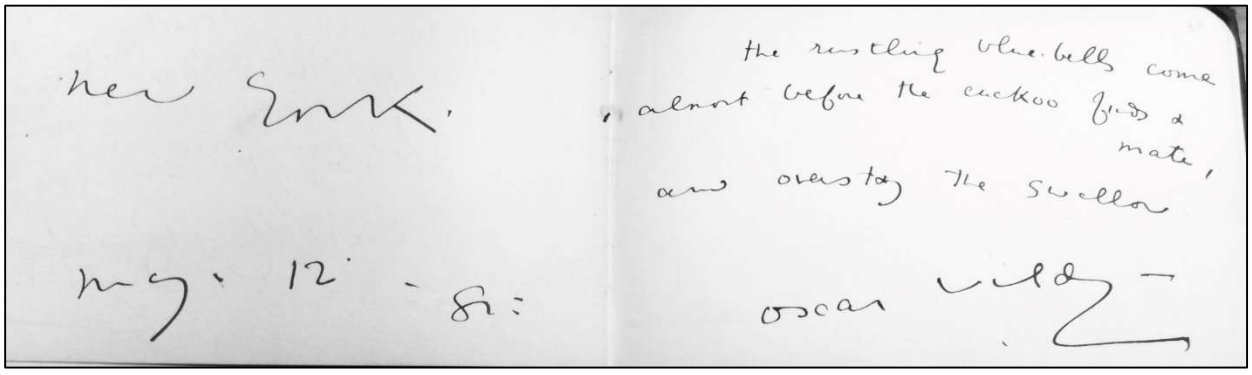
'assignment,' and asked if he could possibly be given a copy of the speech so he could 'beat' the other papers" (31). Supposedly impressed as much by young Bok's restraint around the wine served at the event as with his gall, President Hayes obliges, taking Bok home in his carriage and handing the boy his own—only and handwritten—copy of the speech. The next day, Bok receives an invitation to have dinner with Hayes and his wife, during which he obtains autographs from both and concludes his story by simply saying: "The simple act of turning down his wine-glasses had won for Edward Bok two gracious friends" (34). Gracious, indeed: two years later, when Bok becomes editor of *Brooklyn Magazine*, he convinces Hayes to contribute an article to his first issue, capitalizing on this initial encounter with Hayes—in which he gets paid to turn Hayes's actual handwriting into a newspaper article—into an opportunity to make further money by putting Hayes's writing into circulation.

In *The Americanization*, narrator-Bok recounts these stories as if editor-Bok earns each of his successful encounters separately through his pluck and hard work, always emphasizing the causal impact of Bok's character over any other relational factors. Rather, Young Bok almost certainly received help from Ulysses Grant, whom he'd met months earlier after loitering in the general's hotel lobby, in catching the eye of President Hayes. From narrator-Bok's account, however, the president was primarily struck by Bok's refusal to drink while he was working. Told a different way, this could be the story of a savvy young business operator wriggling into interactions with celebrities because he understands the value of circulating the mementos of their fame. Narrator-Bok, however, constructs it as the story of a young man showing traits of good character in order to gain entrance to the inner world of more successful people of character. What's more,

narrator-Bok reproduces many of the autographs that his alter ego collected, using the story of character to double the autobiographical impact of private-made-public: he not only publicizes his own private experiences, fetishized through his use of third-person, but additionally publishes these names of other successful people, written in their private handwriting but then separated from their "real" selves through Bok's acts of narration and circulation.

Bok never published any of the autographs in his collection until *The Americanization*, and the ones he chooses to include in the autobiography give a telling glimpse into how uses character to construct a profitable narrative of success. In the book, Bok includes a number of autographs from the political, military, and literary scions of the mid-nineteenth century—including, scandalously, Confederate leaders—but tellingly ignores several autographs in his collection that feel like they *should* have stories. Tucked in his autograph book, for example, between the signatures of U. S. Grant and Ralph Waldo Emerson (who Bok recounts meeting in the following chapter of his autobiography) is a sprawling autograph by Oscar Wilde, who included with his name a few obscure lines from the middle of "The Garden of Eros" (Figure 10, below). The year marked in the autograph is unreadable but is almost certainly May 12, 1882, when Wilde

**Figure 10**. Autograph of Oscar Wilde, given to Edward Bok in May 1882. Found in Bok's papers in the Library of Congress.



lectured at the Lee Avenue Baptist Church in Brooklyn. In the autograph book, Wilde misquotes himself, replacing "blackbird" with "cuckoo." Whether this is an oversight or a joke is lost to history—in all of his writing, Bok never tells of meeting Wilde. There was, however, an anonymous review of Wilde's speech published the next day in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which notes that Wilde's lecture was "free from the technical expressions, musty lore, and 'medievalism' of his first lecture [at the Brooklyn Academy of Music the previous February], and was given in good plain English" ("Oscar Wilde"). The reporter claims to have spoken to a number of attendees who expressed begrudging acceptance of Wilde's ideas: now that they've heard Wilde speak again, they admit to being in a "state of probation with good prospects of conversion to a respect for and belief in the honesty, integrity and common sense even, of this apostle of aestheticism." Given the standards to which the review holds Wilde's lecture—common sense and good plain English—we can safely assume that it came from Bok's pen, and that Bok himself was only just weighing the prospects of his conversion to respect for Wilde. Certainly, he found Wilde far too much of a personality to be of use in his autobiography; wearing "a profusion of lace around his neck," Wilde's identity was already too performative, and therefore a kind of used good, not worth the same exchange rate Bok received for the likes of Grant and Hayes.

Bok's own success—as a character, a narrator, and an editor—stems from his shrewd ability to arbitrage character for personality during this period of transition between the two cultures. In each of those roles, Bok realizes the hidden performative value of character by trading it on the market of personality. As the title of his autobiography suggests, the story of success that Bok tells is intertwined with his sense of

American identity. In the final, and most moralizing, chapters of the book, Bok evaluates his life against that standard, asking "To what extent, with his unusual opportunities of fifty years, has the Americanization of Edward Bok gone?" In an eerie act of narrative sublimation, narrator-Bok explains that he must let editor-Bok answer that question, and the book transitions into first-person point of view for its remainder. Editor-cum-narrator Bok goes on to enumerate all the ways in which he been successful because his own character was stronger than that of the average American: his thoroughness, his practical and self-administered education in skills with clear utility (starting with learning English), his respect for authority and for the privileges of citizenship.

Having established his own superior character, Bok flips the subject agency of book's title. He cannot pass as a native-born American but he wonders, rather, whether "the foreign-born does not make in some sense a better American"—more capable, with stronger morals, and more able to clearly see the opportunities for achieving success. Bok's final conclusion is, then, that the "driving power of my life" has been his desire to *create* the America that was good enough for him. "I ask no greater privilege than to be allowed to live to see my potential America become actual…It is a part in trying to shape that America…that I ask in return for what I owe her" (451-2). The Americanization to which the autobiography's title refers, therefore, is not the transformation of Bok into an American but rather the transformation of America into a place fit for Bok. Like Lorimer, Bok's ultimate project is to create America.

*The Americanization of Edward Bok* is, like *Letters from a Self-Made Merchant*, a parody of Gilded Age success manuals in which the author places himself in the position of ultimate agency over the narrative of American success. Parody allows an author to

take editorial agency over both text and time, choosing which elements of past writing are valuable enough for reproduction as well as the critique of those selections. In his *Letters*, Lorimer both reproduces the character advice of past texts and critiques it, claiming control over the past and the present in order to articulate some order of continuity with the fading values of the past. Bok brings an additional business sense to the exercise of power, working the middle not just formally and culturally but also narratively and financially. He edits together, out of the raw material of his own life, the ultimate American success story—enacted by a character who relies on his uber-American character to capitalize on the circulation value of character in a culture of personality—and circulates that story, in the form of an autobiography that allows him to harness the performativity latent in character to create himself as a successful (and Pulitzer Prize-winning) uber-American personality.

**The [Middle] Cannot Hold**

Almost as soon as Bok took home a Pulitzer for his autobiography, its moment was over. Published within weeks of *The Americanization*, the true literary phenomenon of late 1920 was Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, which, as Lewis's biographer James Hutchisson notes, was not only the top-selling novel of 1921 "but also for the entire period from 1900 to 1925 (Hutchisson 42). Famously, at the same moment the Pulitzer's Autobiography Jury was settling on Bok for their prize, the Novel Jury was recommending Lewis, only to have their decision returned to them by the Columbia University Board of Trustees, who deemed *Main Street* unfit to the prize's standard of portraying the "wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of

American manners and manhood" (Weissberg). This incident marked the beginning of a battle against upright American character—and its self-appointed keepers—that Lewis would continue to wage in his pages and beyond. George Babbitt, the protagonist of his next novel, is an exemplar of that American wholesomeness the Pulitzer committee was looking for, and he receives little of the narrative affection with which Lewis portrays Carol Kennicott. As Hutchisson puts it, "To Lewis, Babbitt is doomed: he is both the product and the victim of a culture of conspicuous consumption and boosterism;" despite all his attempts to find contentment by living up to the success manual ideal of American manhood, Babbit can never fill his spiritual hollowness (48). In keeping with that brand, Lewis—also famously—rejected the Pulitzer's novel committee when they finally did give him a call, to award him for his 1926 novel *Arrowsmith*. In his rejection letter, Lewis eschews the entire literary establishment's enforcement of American morality, arguing that prizes like the Pulitzer equate value with a mannered conservatism. Upon receiving the Nobel Prize for literature, five years later, Lewis rang the same bell from an international stage. Bated by Henry Van Dyke's public derision to the Business Men's Association of Germantown that this honor was an insulting nod to the "present day school of scoffing writers" ("Nobel Prize Award to Lewis Is an 'Insult' to America"), Lewis excoriated the populist construction of American character and success that had been dragged along from the previous century by editors like Lorimer and Bok:

> To be not only a best seller in America but to be really beloved, a novelist must assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest, and powerful at golf; that all country towns are filled with neighbors who do nothing from day to day save go about being kind to one another; [and] that although American girls

may be wild, they change always into perfect wives and mothers…" ("Nobel Lecture")

In 1921, then, as Bok made his ultimate cultural arbitrage between the values of character and personality, Lewis gained prominence by devaluing character altogether, creating a household name for himself as a certain kind of literary personality by waging war against the culture of character.

Although George Babbitt is certainly the most well-known of Lewis's instruments of this war, his most finely sharpened—in the satirical sense—was Lowell Schmaltz, a character Lewis produced as an exercise in exploring the supreme heights of Babbittry while in between novels in 1927. Initially conceived for a short story in *The Smart Set*, Lowell Schmaltz, who owns an office-supply business down the street in Zenith from George Babbitt's real estate office, makes Babbitt himself appear measured and eloquent by comparison. Lewis was so enamored by the satirical cleverness of what he'd created in Schmaltz that he wrote an additional five stories and coerced his publisher into releasing the collection under the onerous (and cringingly white-supremacist) title *The Man Who Knew Coolidge: Being the Soul of Lowell Schmaltz, Constructive and Nordic Citizen*. The title echoes Lorimer's own verbose tongue-in-cheek title, but the ensuing volume entirely lacks Lorimer's dry but gentle parody.

If Old Gorgon Graham and Edward Bok are parodic characters written as both tributes to and critiques of the performance of character prerequisite to nineteenth-century success, the similarly preening and bombastic Schmaltz dramatizes character that, performed in the twentieth century, amounts to very little whatsoever. Untethered from the cultural transition in which Lorimer and Bok were situated, Lewis tips from

parody into satire. Each story in *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* is an actual performance in the form of a ranting vernacular monologue. In the introductory monologue, Schmaltz circuitously tells a group of fellow business travelers of his trip to visit his old college chum President Coolidge. His actual encounter at the White House only takes up a fraction of Schmaltz's narrative—and therein lies the joke: Schmaltz is the gasbag *par excellence*, meandering from subject to subject, expounding along the way his views on religion, citizenship, business, travel, and family values before finally and anti-climactically arriving at the ostensible subject of his story. The ensuing five monologues relentlessly follow this same pattern in what James Hutchisson calls "essentially a one-joke book" (170): "The basic flaw of the book is that such monologues are interesting for only a few pages. After awhile, the sheer intensity of such a performance wearies the person reading it" (171). The year after Lewis published *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*, Algonquin B-lister T. K. Whipple commented that Lewis's characters in general had lost their substance. "They are not individual persons; they have never developed personality" (Whipple 214). Vacuuming out the substance, however, was exactly Lewis's point; by the time he arrived at Lowell Schmaltz, Lewis was writing men who explicitly performed their character in order to prove they were successful, and in, separating the performance from any actual moral fiber, Lewis was creating characters that were *all* personality.

In October 1924, in the midst of the presidential election and his own campaign against American character, Lewis published a three-part series of political articles in *The Nation* called "Be Brisk with Babbitt," written from the point of view of a journalist visiting Zenith to report on who George Babbitt endorses for the highest office in the land. Babbitt, naturally, is a Coolidge man, though all his acquaintances—the avatars of

actual hard-working Americans—have all come around to the progressive third-party candidate Robert La Follette. Babbitt, though, is going to vote just how *The Saturday Evening Post* tells him to. Coolidge may be "showy" but he's also "not a fellow that goes off half-cocked, or that yields to every passing wave of the ill-balanced popular winds of fashion" (Lewis "Be Brisk with Babbitt" 409). Coolidge feels like a solid status-quo candidate, and the status quo is just fine with Babbitt. "There was a cartoon in the *Saturday Evening Post* that showed where, unlike Europe, every American laborer owns a nice automobile and a dandy little detached cottage…so that's why I'm going to vote for Coolidge" (411). The *Post's* version of America is an America that Babbitt can get behind.

This potshot at the *Post* was a particularly ornery move from Lewis, who was still actively publishing in the magazine. (According to an article that Lewis's biographer Mark Schorer published in *The Atlantic* in 1961, the first person Lewis told about the Nobel was Lorimer's assistant editor, Thomas Costain, who happened to call Lewis just minutes after the Nobel committee to adjust up a payment for a longer-than-usual story.) The reference understandably rankled George Horace Lorimer, who responded in public with an article in the December 1924 issue of *The Bookman* titled "The Unpopular Editor of the Popular Magazine." Against Lewis's satirical protestations that "literature in America is being debauched by lowbrow editors" telling Americans what they should think, Lorimer argues that, as an editor, it actually *is* his job to critique and construct American culture in the process of choosing what to include in his magazine. "A book is bought or left on the stalls on the strength of printed or oral criticism. The magazines goes to all classes, ages, and conditions. The editor must be their reviewer" (396). The

editor is the ultimate middle-man—operating in between private and public, passing from author to audience, determining the circulation value of creative production—and therefore does, indeed, get to be the narrator of American culture and values. Lorimer closes his article with a meditation on what performing success looks like in Lewis's circles:

> Some years ago I was visited by a dull, prosy member of a dull, prosy group of pseudo-intellectuals. After a few minutes of condescending conversation in the jargon of his type, he concluded: "I have decided that I should like to write for 'The Saturday Evening Post.' I have seen many thoughtful people reading it lately." And as I gave him a firm, goodbye handshake, I said to myself, knowing just what he meant by "thoughtful people": "We must look into this and correct it." (397)

Lorimer might be a Babbitt, that is, but at least he's not a snob.

# REFERENCES CITED


Abbott, Lawrence Fraser. "The Middlebrows." *The Outlook*, vol. 147, no. 5, Nov. 1927, pp. 281–289.

Amory, Cleveland. "Introduction - A Fair Kept." *Vanity Fair: A Cavalcade of the 1920s and 1930s*, edited by Frederic Bradlee Cleveland Amory, Viking Press, 1960, pp. 7–8.

Ardis, Ann L. "Making Middlebrow Culture, Making Middlebrow Literary Texts Matter: The Crisis, Easter 1912." *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 18–40.

"Are You a Middlebrow?" *Popular Radio*, June 1924, p. 619.

Barnes, Djuna. "James Joyce." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, pp. 52–53.

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1975.

Barton, Ralph. "A Typical First Night Audience in New York: The Scene Which Invariably Confronts the Actor." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, pp. 52–53.

Baxendale, John. "Priestley and the Highbrows." *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920 - 1960*, edited by Erica Brown and Mary Grover, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 69–81.

"Be a Middle-Brow." *The Seattle Star*, vol. 24, no. 238, 29 Nov. 1922, p. 6.

Belsey, Catherine. "Pleasure: Have We Neglected It?" *A Future for Criticism*, Wiley Blackwell, 2011, pp. 1–17.

Benchley, Robert. "The Dullest Book of the Month." Vanity Fair, vol. 12, no. 2, Apr. 1919, p. 39.

Beveridge, Albert. "Letter to George Horace Lorimer." 16 June 1903. Albert J. Beveridge Papers, 1788 – 1943, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

Bok, Edward. *The Americanization of Edward Bok: The Autobiography of a Dutch Boy Fifty Years After*. Scribner's & Sons, 1920.

---. "Autograph: Oscar Wilde." 12 May 1882. Edward William Bok papers, 1880-1926, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

---. “Manuscript: The Americanization of Edward Bok.” 1920. Edward William Bok papers, 1880-1926, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.

---. “The Keys to Success.” *Modern Eloquence: Library of After-Dinner Speeches, Lectures, Occasional Addresses*, edited by Thomas Brackett Reed, vol. 4, J. D. Morris, 1900, pp. 95–122.

Booth, Wayne. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. University of Chicago Press, 1974.

---. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Kind, Harvard University Press, 1984.

---. “The Hierarchy of Legitimacies.” *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 95–98.

---. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Translated by Susan Emanuel, Stanford University Press, 1992.

Boyd, Nancy. “Out of Reach of the Baby.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 48.

Brooks, Van Wyck. “Highbrow and Lowbrow.” *The Forum*, vol. 53, no. 4, Apr. 1915, pp. 481–492.

Broun, Heywood. “And the Moral of That--.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, pp. 39–108.

Brown, Erica. “Introduction.” *Working Papers on the Web*, July 2008, https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/Brown.html.

Brown, Erica, and Mary Grover. “Introduction: Middlebrow Matters.” *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920 - 1960*, edited by Erica Brown and Mary Grover, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 1–24.

Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. University of California Press, 1969.

---. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. University of California Press, 1969.

Burstein, Jessica. “A Few Words about Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé.” *American Literary History*, vol. 14, no. 2, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 227–254.

Casey, Janet Galligani. “Middlebrow Reading and Undergraduate Teaching: The Place of the Middlebrow in the Academy.” *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920 - 1960*, edited by Erica Brown and Mary Grover, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 25–36.

Chapman, John Jay. “Art in Our Universities.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 12, no. 2, Apr. 1919, pp. 49–90.

Chappell, George S. “The Etymology of Art.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 47.

Clinton Ransom, J. *The Successful Man and His Manifold Relations with Life*. Southern Publishing House, 1886.

Cohn, Jan. *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989.

Coleman, Claire. “Middlebrow and Proud: Experts Say It’s Time to Embrace Middle-of-the-Road Tastes (so You Can Stop Pretending to Love Opera!).” *The Daily Mail*, 1 Aug. 2011, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2020891/Middlebrow-proud-Experts-say-time-embrace-middle-road-tastes-stop-pretending-love-opera.html.

Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. Penguin Classics, 2007.

Costain, Thomas. “Letter to Ring Lardner.” 21 Feb. 1922. Wesley Winans Stout Papers, 1913-1954, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

---. “Letter to Ring Lardner.” 6 Mar. 1922. Wesley Winans Stout Papers, 1913-1954, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

Cuddy-Keane, Melba. *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

D’Hoker, Elise. “Theorizing the Middlebrow: An Interview with Nicola Humble.” *Interférences Littéraires/Literaire Interferenities*, vol. 7, 2011, pp. 259–265.

Damon-Moore, Helen. *Magazines By the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies’ Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910*. SUNY Press, 1994.

Davis, Diane. *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.

“Doris Keane as Catherine of Russia.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 43.

Douglas, George H. *The Smart Magazines: 50 Years of Literary Revelry and High Jinks at Vanity Fair, the New Yorker, Life, Esquire, and the Smart Set*. University of Michigan, 2008.

Driscoll, Beth. *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Fish, Stanley. *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One*. Harper Collins, 2011.

"Friday Morning." *The United Opinion*, vol. 42, no. 14, 22 Dec. 1922, p. 4.

Friedman, Devin. "Middlebrow: The Taste That Dare Not Speak Its Name." *GQ*, 10 June 2011, https://www.gq.com/story/middlebrow-culture.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading." *Modernism, Volume 1*, edited by Vivian Liska Astraour Eysteinsson, John Benjamins Publishing, 2007, pp. 35–52.

Glass, Loren. *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980*. New York University Press, 2004.

Greenberg, Clement. "The State of American Writing." *The Partisan Review*, vol. 25, no. 8, pp. 876–879.

Grover, Mary. *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarassment*. Associated University Presse, 2009.

Gruber Garvey, Ellen. *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1810s to 1910s*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

Habermann, Ina. *Myth, Memory, and the Middlebrow: Priestley, Du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness*. Springer, 2010.

Haglund, David. "Is 'Middlebrow' Still An Insult?" *Slate Brow Beat*, 12 Oct. 2011, https://slate.com/culture/2011/10/middlebrow-origins-and-insults.html.

Halford, Macy. "On 'Middlebrow.'" *The New Yorker*, 10 Feb. 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-middlebrow.

---. "Reviewers on Reviewing." *The New Yorker*, 8 Feb. 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/reviewers-on-reviewing.

Hammill, Faye. "In Good Company: Modernism, Celebrity, and Sophistication in Vanity Fair." *Modernist Star Maps: Celebrity, Modernity, Culture*, edited by Aaron Jaffe and Jonathan Goldman, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 123–135.

---. *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*. University of Texas Press, 2007.

Hammill, Faye, and Karen Leick. "Modernism and the Quality Magazines: Vanity Fair (1914-1936), American Mercury (1924-81), New Yorker (1925- ), Esquire (1933- )." *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II, North America 1894-1960*, edited by Peter Booker and Andrew Thacker, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 1–28; 176–196.

Harker, Jaime. *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship Between the Wars*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

Harper, Phillip Brian. *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*. New York University Press, 2015.

Heinze, Andrew R. "Schizophrenia Americana: Aliens, Alienists, and the 'Personality Shift' of Twentieth-Century Culture." *American Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2003, pp. 227–256.

Herriman, George. *Krazy & Ignatz: "Shifting Sands Dusts Its Cheeks in Powdered Beauty," Compounding the Complete Full-Page Comic Strips, with Some Extra Oddities. 1937 - 38*. Edited by Bill Blackbeard, Fantagraphics Books, 2006.

Hilkey, Judy. *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America*. University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

"How to Study This Number of Vanity Fair." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 12, no. 2, Apr. 1919, p. 25.

Humble, Nicola. "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading." *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 41–59.

---. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. University of Illinois Press, 1985.

---. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. Routledge, 1994.

Hutchisson, James M. *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.

Huxley, Aldous. “The Cry for the Messiah in the Arts.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 17, no. 5, Jan. 1922, p. 57.

“In Vanity Fair.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 2, no. 3, May 1914, p. 19.

“In Vanity Fair.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 2, no. 2, Apr. 1914, p. 15.

“In Vanity Fair.” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 2, no. 1, Mar. 1914, p. 15.

“In Vanity Fair.” *Dress & Vanity Fair*, vol. 1, no. 2, November1913, p. 21.

Jaffe, Aaron, and Jonathan Goldman. “Introduction.” *Modernist Star Maps: Celebrity, Modernity, Culture*, edited by Aaron Jaffe and Jonathan Goldman, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 1–16.

“Just for Tonight.” *The Evening Caledonian*, vol. 3, no. 122, 22 Nov. 1918, p. 1.

Krabbendam, Hans. *The Model Man: A Life of Edward William Bok, 1863-1930*. Brill Rodolpi, 2001.

Leavis, F. R. “Mirrors Up to Art.” *Spectator* , 5 Jan. 1962, p. 25.

Leavis, Q. D. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Chatto & Windus, 1939.

Lewis, Sinclair. “Be Brisk with Babbitt (Part I).” *Nation* , vol. 119, no. 3093, 15 Oct. 1924, pp. 409–411.

---. *Nobel Lecture: The Fear of American Literature*. 12 Dec. 1930, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1930/lewis/lecture/.

---. *The Man Who Knew Coolidge: Being the Soul of Lowell Schmaltz, Constructive and Nordic Citizen*. Harcourt, Brace, 1928.

“Lissue Handkerchiefs (ad).” *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 6.

Lorimer, George Horace. “Letter to Edna Ferber.” 14 June 1914. Wesley Winans Stout Papers, 1913-1954, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

---. “Letter to Edna Ferber.” 15 Dec. 1916. Wesley Winans Stout Papers, 1913-1954, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

---. *Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son: Being the Letters Written by John Graham, Head of the House of Graham & Company, Pork-Packers in Chicago, Familiarly Known on 'Change as "Old Gorgon Graham," to Hi Son, Pierrepont, Facetiously Known to His Intimates as "Piggy."* Small, Maynard & Company, 1903.

---. "The Unpopular Editor of a Popular Magazine." *The Bookman*, vol. 60, no. 4, Dec. 1924, pp. 396–397.

Lynes, Russell. "High-Brow, Low-Brow, Middle-Brow." *Life*, vol. 26, no. 15, 11 Apr. 1949, pp. 99–101.

---. "Postscript: A 1976 Commentary." *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, WoodrowWilson International Center for Scholars, 1976, pp. 158–160.

---. "Reprint: 'Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow' (1949)." *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1976, pp. 146–158.

MacGowan, Kenneth. "The Theatrical Callboard." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 16d.

"'Marjolaine'--a Costume Comedy with Music." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 71.

Mathews, William. *Getting on in the World; Or, Hints on Success in Life*. S. C. Griggs and Company, 1879.

Menand, Louis. "Browbeaten: Dwight Macdonald's War on Midcult." *The New Yorker*, 5 Sept. 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/09/05/browbeaten.

"Middlebrow, A.n." *OED Online*, https://www-oed-com/view/Entry/252048. Accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

Muecke, Douglas Colin. *The Compass of Irony*. Methuen, 1969.

Nascher, I. L. "Esthesiomania." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 12, no. 2, Apr. 1919, p. 42.

"Nobel Prize Award to Lewis Is an 'Insult' to America, Says van Dyke, Hitting Scoffers." *The New York Times*, vol. 80, no. 26607, 29 Nov. 1930, p. 1.

North, Michael. *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Ohmann, Richard. *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*. Verso, 1996.

"Oscar Wilde: He Again Visits the City of Churches and Meets with a Warm Reception on a Cold Night--The Easter District People Highly Edified." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13 May 1882.

Parker, Dorothy. "Bohemia." *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, edited by Marion Meade, Penguin, 2006, p. 223.

"Pauline Lord in 'Anna Christie.'" *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 34.

Pepper, Terence. "The Portrait Photograph in the Modern Age." *Vanity Fair, the Portraits: A Century of Iconic Images*, edited by Graydon Carter et al., Abrams, 2008, pp. 10–20.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. University of Alabama Press, 2004.

Pollentier, Caroline. "Configuring Middleness: Bourdieu, L'Art Moyen and the Broadbrow." *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920 - 1960*, edited by Erica Brown and Mary Grover, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 37–54.

Quigley, Dorothy. *Success Is for You*. E. P. Dutton and Company, 1897.

Rainey, Lawrence. "The Cultural Economy of Modernism." *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, edited by Michael Levenson, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 33–68.

Robertson, Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Duke University Press, 1996.

Robinson, Douglas. "Ring Lardner's Dual Audience and the Capitalist Double Bind." *American Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 2, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 264–287.

Ronald, Susan. *Conde Nast: The Man and His Empire--A Biography*. MacMillan, 2019.

Rose, Donald Frank. "Dietary Discriminations." *The Forum*, vol. 78, no. 3, Sept. 1927, p. 466.

Rubin, Joan Shelley. *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Rukeyser, Merryle Stanley. "The Financial Situation: America Returns to the Ancient Art of Mining Copper." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, pp. 14–15.

"Sales Prospectus, Saturday Evening Post." 1900. Wesley Winans Stout Papers, 1913-1954, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC.

Sargeant, Withrop. "In Defense of the High-Brow." *Life*, vol. 26, no. 15, 11 Apr. 1949, p. 102.

Scholes, Robert. "Small Magazines, Large Ones, And Those In-Between." *Little Magazines & Modernism: New Approaches*, edited by Suzanne Churchill Adam McKible, Routledge, 2016, pp. 215–226.

Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis and the Nobel Prize*. Oct. 1961, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1961/10/sinclair-lewis-and-the-nobel-prize/305481/.

Scott, A. O. *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth*. Penguin, 2016.

---. "The Squeeze on the Middlebrow." *The New York TImes*, 1 Aug. 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/03/arts/a-resurgence-in-inequality-and-its-effects-on-culture.html.

Seldes, Gilbert. "The Damned Effrontery of the Two-a-Day: Being a Pursuit of the Elemental and Vulgar in Refined Vaudeville." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 19, no. 2, Oct. 1922, p. 51.

Smiles, Samuel. *Self-Help; with Illustrations of Character and Conduct*. Ticknor and Fields, 1861.

Space Between Society. "The Battle of the Brows: Cultural Distinctions in the Space Between, 1914-1945 (Feb 15/June 16-18)." *Call for Papers (U Penn)*, 9 Jan. 2011, https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2011/01/09/update-the-battle-of-the-brows-cultural-distinctions-in-the-space-between-1914-1945.

Stratton, Matthew. *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism*. Fordham University Press, 2014.

Sullivan, Melissa, and Sophie Blanch. "Introduction: The Middlebrow: Within or Without Modernism." *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 6, no. 1, May 2011, pp. 1–17.

Sumner, David E. *The Magazine Century: American Magazines Since 1900*. Vol. 9, Peter Lang, 2010.

Susman, Warren I. "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture." *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, Pantheon, 1984, pp. 271–285.

Tebbel, John William. *George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post*. Doubleday, 1948.

"The Fashions and Pleasures of New York." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, pp. 26–28.

"The Good Maxwell (Maxwell Cars Ad)." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 3.

"The 'Highbrow' Jury Disagrees." *Collier's: The National Weekly*, vol. 55, no. 4, 10 Apr. 1915, p. 15.

"The Limousine of the Cellar (American Radiator Company Ad)." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 0.

"The Most Beautiful Car in America (Paige Motor Car Ad)." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 5.

"The New Order of Critical Values." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, pp. 40–41.

"Tiffany & Co Quality: A Tradition (Tiffany Ad)." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 1.

Tracy, Daniel. "From Vernacular Humor to Middlebrow Modernism: Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and the Creation of Literary Value." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 66, no. 1, University of Arizona, 2010, pp. 115–143.

Warshow, Robert. "Woofed with Dreams: Krazy Kat, by George Herriman." *The Partisan Review*, vol. 13, no. 5, Nov. 1946, pp. 587–590.

"We Nominate for the Hall of Fame." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 72.

Weissberg, Claudia Stone. "Sinclair Lewis, 'the Main Street Burglary' and a Rejection Notice." *The Pulitzer Prizes*, https://www.pulitzer.org/article/sinclair-lewis-main-street-burglary-and-rejection-notice.

"Welcome In Exclusive (Chandler Motor Car Co Ad)." *Vanity Fair*, vol. 18, no. 2, Apr. 1922, p. 11.

Whipple, T. K. *Spokesmen*. University of California Press, 1963.

Widdemer, Margaret. "Message and Middlebrow." *The Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. IX, no. 31, 18 Feb. 1933, pp. 433–434.

Woolf, Virginia. "Middlebrow." *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, pp. 178–186.