

**TRANSGRESSIVE SEXUALITY AND CULTURAL HIERARCHY:
THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SINGLE WOMAN IN WOMEN'S
FICTION, 1920S TO THE 1940S**

by

Emma Sterry

PhD English Studies
School of Humanities
University of Strathclyde

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Abstract

My thesis examines literary representations of the single woman across a spectrum of women's writing from the 1920s to the 1940s. Drawing on sociohistorical contexts, I argue that fictions of this period draw on a plethora of different identities for the single woman – the spinster, the old maid, the lesbian, the invert, the New Woman, the odd woman, the nymphomaniac, the widow – and depict her as an incoherent and fragmented figure. I use the single woman as a site for interrogating the perceived ideological and stylistic differences in texts associated with middlebrow and modernist culture. I modify the alignment of modernism with radicalism and middlebrow with conservatism by examining the ways in which the single woman is caught between opposing ideologies – domesticity and bohemianism, tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, and the heterosexual and the homosexual. I also examine the single woman in golden age crime fiction to demonstrate how the genre sits awkwardly between tradition and modernity, and middlebrow and modernist literary cultures. My work makes an original contribution to knowledge by positioning the single woman as a locus for cultural anxieties concerning transgressive sexuality, destabilised gender spheres and brow boundaries, in order both to reimagine the landscape of women's writing from the 1920s to the 1940s and to become part of an on-going dialogue concerning the reconceptualisation of cultural hierarchies.

Key authors considered are: Dorothy L. Sayers; Ngaio Marsh; Dorothy Bowers;
Josephine Tey; Molly Keane; Elizabeth Bowen; Eliot Bliss; Antonia White; Rosamond
Lehmann; Dorothy Richardson; Sylvia Townsend Warner; Djuna Barnes; and Anaïs Nin.

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Introduction

My thesis examines the figure of the single woman across a spectrum of women's writing from the 1920s to the 1940s. Drawing on sociohistorical contexts, I argue that the single woman appears in myriad forms in literature of the period, all of which problematise boundaries between normative and transgressive sexuality. In recent years, a substantial body of criticism on women's writing during the first half of the twentieth century has been produced, but there has been little sustained, comparative analysis across genres and cultural hierarchies. In exploring the representation of the single woman in the context of modernist and middlebrow culture, my work emphasises the parallels and disparities between the modes of fiction within these cultures. Modernist representations of sexuality are usually assumed to be radical and progressive while the middlebrow is associated with tradition and conservatism. I examine the ways in which the single woman is caught between opposing ideologies – between domesticity and bohemianism, tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, and heterosexual and homosexual desire. My close readings uncover reactionary elements in modernist fictions and radicalism in texts usually associated with the middlebrow by positioning the single woman as a locus for cultural anxieties concerning transgressive sexuality, gender spheres, and brow boundaries.

The project is not what I had initially envisioned. I was originally interested in the depiction of lesbian desire in women's fiction between the two world wars. The lesbian seemed to appear in a vast array of fiction during this period, particularly in the modernist texts produced by writers such as Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, H. D., Mary Butts and Natalie Barney. Critics of this period of women's literature, including

Shari Benstock, Bonnie Kime Scott, Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, have often used the terms ‘sapphic’ or ‘sapphic modernism’ as a means of grouping these fictions together.¹ Named after the Greek poet Sappho, sapphism became a by-word for lesbian desire. Although its precise meaning has shifted with historical periods, it became associated with a community of expatriate artists based in Paris during the interwar years. Headed by the American heiress Natalie Barney and her lover Renée Vivien, these literary salons (attended at various times by figures such as Colette, Vita Sackville-West, Radclyffe Hall and Romaine Brooks) have become central to discussions of lesbian subculture during the interwar years. For Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, sapphism can be used interchangeably with the term lesbianism in order to ‘signal the discursive fluidity of same-sex desire as an emergent cultural category’.² They situate their work as an extension of Diana Collecott’s approach to the sapphic, which she views as encompassing ‘aesthetics and intersubjectivity as well as sexual practice, with all that these involve for women in a patriarchal culture’.³ As a cultural category, then, sapphism not only signifies lesbian desire, but also radicalism, community and the transgressive sexualities of modernity.

Thus, as Doan and Garrity are keen to emphasise, the term sapphic modernity gestures towards how ‘during the interwar period [...] discrete categorisations and boundaries [of sexuality and sexual identities] were far more fluid than has previously

¹ See particularly Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, 2 vols (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995); and Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, eds, *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

² Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, ‘Introduction’, in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-13 (p. 4).

³ Diana Collecott, *H. D. and Sapphic Modernity, 1910-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 4.

been acknowledged'.⁴ Their argument is indicative of a reconceptualisation of lesbian desire that is not necessarily identified with an exclusively lesbian identity. However, the reiterated association of sapphic modernity and sapphic modernism is more complicated than Doan and Garrity appear to recognise, since it depends on an unproblematic alignment of lesbian desire with modernist culture. But in Britain, the most infamous example of a novel concerned with lesbian sexuality was a more realist and conventional narrative. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) recounts the life of the upper-class lesbian, Stephen Gordon. Hall appropriated sexological theory in order to defend her heroine's (and, seemingly, her own) sexual orientation, following the criminalisation of lesbian acts in the British legal system in 1924. Sometimes dubbed the 'science of sex', sexology drew on Darwinian models of biological systems to offer an account of what Rita Felski describes as 'the physiological and congenital roots of human erotic preferences'.⁵ In cataloguing a range of sexual behaviours, sexology came to be seen as a regulatory practice which constructed concepts of normative and non-normative sexuality. Hall had been influenced by the sexological concept of inversion, the belief that homosexuality stemmed from male gender traits being assigned to a female body, or vice versa.⁶ In contrast to social doctrine which emphasised lesbianism as unnatural and perverse, Hall's text contended that homosexuality was innate and therefore deserving of compassion. The text was quickly condemned and banned on the grounds of obscenity.

⁴ Doan and Garrity, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁵ Rita Felski, 'Introduction', in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desire*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

⁶ The sexologists most commonly associated with the theory of inversion were Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Key texts include Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928) and Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

The question that struck me was: why was this text censored, and not others? Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) – published just a few months after Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* – and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) were not subjected to the same charges, despite their depiction of lesbian characters. Arguably, the lesbian figures of modernist fiction were more transgressive in terms of both gender signification and morality: the promiscuous Robin Vote of *Nightwood* and the ambiguously gendered Orlando, for example. These texts demonstrate the fluidity of sexual desire that Doan and Garrity argue sapphic modernity suggests; Hall's text, meanwhile, re-enacted the medicalisation and pathologisation of lesbian desire. Perhaps the different style of these narratives was significant. Modernist texts were typically opaque, experimenting with subjectivity, temporality, allusion, allowing them to obscure their radical depictions from the eyes of the newly-expanded reading public. Conversely, Hall's realist and rather prosaic prose meant its transgressiveness could not be hidden, allowing the everyday woman access to lesbian discourse and practices.

I had intended to use *The Well of Loneliness* and its reception as a starting point from which to explore the depiction of lesbianism in both modernist and realist fictions, hoping to argue that the latter tended to present more literal and cohesive lesbian identities (thereby rendering them more susceptible to censorship) while the former offered more ambiguous portrayals of lesbian desire. As I began to select and examine texts, though, it quickly became apparent that matters were not so straightforward. Firstly, I had been working on an assumption that censorship itself was an unproblematic, and ultimately static, concept. The literary trial of *The Well of Loneliness* was a legal case mounted by an anxious British government. Controversial as it may have been, it can

only reveal the workings of state censorship. During this period, there were other modes of restriction at work, including pressure on authors from publishers to revise their work to avoid controversy, and a general reluctance to sign up texts that could attract problems.⁷ It was not only homosexuality that was targeted either: obscenity charges had also been levied against James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) for their (hetero)sexual explicitness. Furthermore, the ban on *Ulysses* demonstrates how modernist texts were not necessarily protected from censorship.

Secondly, my hypothesis had envisioned clear boundaries between realist and modernist fiction. As Ann Ardis has shown, though, the conceptualisation of realism as antithetical to modernism was perpetuated by modernist rhetoric as part of its insistence on distinct boundaries between high and low art.⁸ Modernist fiction was supposed to be radical and experimental; realist fiction was accessible and popular, at times even lowbrow. *The Well of Loneliness* reveals how such boundaries can be collapsed. The novel has been discussed in relation to literary modernism in a number of studies.⁹ The positioning of *The Well of Loneliness* in modernist culture has been due in part to the literary figures from modernist circles, such as Virginia Woolf, who came out in the

⁷ For instance, Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* (1928) was printed privately and distributed by Barnes herself on the streets of Paris. Her later novel, *Nightwood*, secured publication by Faber and Faber largely due to its endorsement by T. S. Eliot, and subject to the removal of the more controversial elements of Barnes's manuscript.

⁸ Ann Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). This is explored in further detail in Chapter One, pp. 38-9.

⁹ Examples include Laura Green, 'Hall of Mirrors: Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Modernist Fictions of Identity', *Twentieth-Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, 49.3 (2003), 277-97; Lorelee MacPike, 'Is Mary Llewellyn an Invert? The Modernist Supertext of *The Well of Loneliness*', in *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-readings*, ed. by Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), pp. 73-89; Scott's *Refiguring Modernism*; and Joanne Winning, 'Writing by the Light of *The Well*: Radclyffe Hall and The Lesbian Modernists', in *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on 'The Well of Loneliness'*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 372-93.

text's defence. However, the subject matter of the novel also plays an important role. *The Well of Loneliness* has an undeniably important place in both lesbian fiction and history. Despite its apparent endorsement of inversion, though, the book has also been incorporated into discussions of a sapphic model of lesbianism. Joanne Winning, for example, has argued that the novel actually 'operate[s] upon the same sets of discourses and [...] inflect[s] some of the highbrow experiments of lesbian modernism' and that like its lesbian modernist contemporaries, it was 'a bildungsroman in which Stephen Gordon's coming to writing also teleologically structures her coming into lesbian identity'.¹⁰ While Doan and Garrity position inversion as antithetical to sapphism, Winning's commentary allows for these seemingly conflicting models to coexist within *The Well of Loneliness*.

The different models and conceptions of lesbian desire available in literary criticism of *The Well of Loneliness* highlight the ambiguity in depictions of female sexuality in literature of this period. As I began to explore individual texts in more detail, it became increasingly difficult to separate lesbian figures from heterosexual ones. The number of women's novels depicting supposedly lesbian characters from the 1920s to the 1940s is sizeable; they include Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927); Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927); Dorothy L. Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1927); Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936); Mary Renault's *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1943); and Dorothy Strachey's *Olivia* (1949), to name but a few. Unlike Stephen Gordon, though, many of these characters (Leonora from *The Friendly Young Ladies*, Sydney from *The Hotel* or Judith from *Dusty Answer*, for example) were also involved in heterosexual

¹⁰ Winning, 'Writing by the Light of *The Well*', p. 374.

relationships or romances. Rather than being easily identifiable as lesbian, these characters often seemed caught between heterosexual and homosexual desire. It became apparent that transgressive female sexuality was not simply about lesbian desire, but about the problematisation and instability of heterosexual identity: in other words, the rejection of ‘heteronormativity’, the term coined by Michael Warner to describe the perpetuation of a binary view of sex and gender that constructs heterosexuality as the norm for sexual orientation.¹¹

Warner’s work, and the field of queer theory that it belongs to, have been crucial in highlighting how gender and sexuality are social constructs, rather than natural, unproblematic categories. Warner’s study has an affiliation with the work of Adrienne Rich, particularly her highly influential essay ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, where she denounces heterosexuality as a political construct which constrains and denigrates female sexuality. The ambiguous characters in much of the fiction I have looked at can be positioned on what Rich describes as a lesbian continuum: a model of female identity that does not necessarily signify lesbian desire, but rather a range of female sexual experiences that are not exclusively heterosexual. Rich attacks the institution she terms ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, arguing that women have heterosexual identity forced onto them by patriarchal society.¹² In this context, women who resist absorption into this institution (by remaining unmarried) reject heteronormativity. While this is certainly true of the lesbian, it also expands the parameters of what constitutes transgressive sexuality to potentially include the single

¹¹ Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹² Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 23-75.

woman.

The single woman in literature has attracted attention, particularly in studies of Victorian and interwar fiction. The phrase, in its most basic sense, denotes a woman who is not married, but studies often focus on a particular conception of the single woman: the spinster, the odd woman, the New Woman, the old maid.¹³ Yet the term ‘single woman’ can be a complex and contradictory signifier. As my analysis of these different types of single women in their sociohistorical contexts in Chapter Three demonstrates, these seemingly distinct categories of single woman begin to bleed into one other. The discussion of the lesbian, however, has been typically absent from studies of the single woman. The importance of the lesbian as a separate category should not be completely effaced: indeed, in subsuming this category into a discussion of the single woman, there lies a risk in positioning the lesbian in opposition to heterosexual desire, thus reinscribing heteronormativity. However, my study is concerned with the ambiguities of heterosexual and homosexual *desire* and rejects the notion that this is aligned with fixed sexual identities. In doing so, I offer a reimagining of the single woman as sexual category in order to illuminate the fissures and contradictions of transgressive sexuality in women’s fiction of the 1920s to the 1940s.

The transgressiveness of the single woman in the context of heteronormativity, and the blurring of boundaries between hetero-and homosexual desire that depictions of

¹³ For example, Sheila Jeffreys focuses on the spinster in *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985), as does Laura Doan in *Old Maids To Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), which also makes reference to the old maid. Meanwhile, Elaine Showalter discusses the odd woman and the New Woman in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), and Deborah Parsons discusses the New Woman in *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

her enact, holds a particular resonance in the interwar period, as sociohistorical accounts of female sexuality and emancipation show. The censorship of *The Well of Loneliness* seems indicative of a nervousness concerning the visibility of lesbian desire at this time. The inversion model that the text advocates signals a belief in the innateness of homosexuality, yet the debates surrounding the text reveal concern that the trial was actually promoting lesbian practices and providing women with sexual knowledge previously unavailable to them. Evidence of such anxiety is revealed in documents recently uncovered at the National Archive, showing that despite complaints in 1936 about a health book entitled *The Single Woman and Her Emotional Problems* (which suggested that lesbianism may be an alternative for those women who were having difficulties finding an eligible man), the British Home Office was reluctant to publicly denounce the text for fear that it would increase knowledge of lesbian practices.¹⁴ Pointing to the furore that surrounded the trial of *The Well of Loneliness*, officials appeared fearful that women might begin to experiment with lesbianism once aware of its existence.

The considerable anxiety concerning lesbianism can be explained through an analysis of sociohistorical developments during the period. As Chapter Two discusses, while lesbian desire had been articulated in sexological and scientific discourse at the turn of the century, it was not legally recognised in the British judicial system until 1924. The archive documents relating to *The Single Woman and Her Emotional Problems* are indicative of a specific concern over lesbianism at a time when the roles and position of women in British society were undergoing a dramatic transformation. The absence of

¹⁴ Richard Ford, 'Censors Feared Impact of Lesbian Books', *The Times*, 3 October 2005, p. 19. The article makes reference to documents held in the National Archives at Kew.

men from the home front during the First World War meant women had increasingly taken on industrial jobs that were previously the domain of men. The suffrage movement directly contributed to the extension of the franchise in 1928 to all women who were twenty-one years or over. Furthermore, the death of vast numbers of male soldiers during the First World War meant that the number of women in Britain outnumbered men. Marriage had traditionally been a way of keeping women economically, politically and emotionally subservient, but had also made them responsible for the nurturing of strong men to defend the country. Increased emancipation and a shortage of potential husbands, however, led to a fear over a decline in both the marriage and birth rate; lesbianism was seen as exacerbating an already existing problem.

Part of the problem in combating the spread of lesbian practice, however, was the difficulty in identifying it. As discussed in Chapter Two, critics such as Caroline Howlett have pointed to a destabilisation of gender signifiers during this period, meaning the outward dress of a woman could no longer mark her as either subservient or subversive.¹⁵ In practice, this meant that deviance, and especially sexual deviance, could not be detected through appearance. Marriage was an easily identifiable sign that a woman was heterosexual (or was at least willing to partake in its institutions), but how could the sexual orientation of the single woman be identified? I argue that the difficulty in marking heterosexuality is evident in the plethora of contradictory and conflicting categories of single woman that were available during the interwar years, and it is precisely this difficulty that makes the single woman of especial interest in exploring

¹⁵ Caroline Howlett, 'Femininity Slashed: Suffragette Militancy, Modernism and Gender', in *Modernist Sexualities*, ed. by Hugh Stevens and Caroline Howlett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 72-91.

transgressive sexuality in the period. The fluid conception of female sexuality that I envision means that even a woman's married status was not necessarily representative of an exclusively heterosexual identity; certainly the married woman who was unfaithful to her husband, who sought a divorce from him, or still indulged in potentially erotic female friendships, was transgressive too. Indeed, several of the female characters within the fictions I have chosen to examine were either estranged from their husbands or widowed, but it still possible to include these in a discussion of the single woman. In her study of singleness in England, Katherine Holden articulates the 'difficulties of creating clear conceptual boundaries between marriage and singleness'.¹⁶ She describes how:

[s]ome census tables used the term 'marriageable' to include widows and divorcees while others counted married workers by age without giving a similar breakdown for single, widowed or divorced workers. Equally, before the 1921 census, because divorce was relatively rare, divorcees were not even included as an official category and it is unclear whether they were counted among the widowed, married or single population.¹⁷

The category of the single woman is so marked by ambivalence and ambiguity that it can paradoxically encompass those who were, or are, married. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of female sexuality in relation to the family unit, and the emphasis on women as mothers, daughters and wives, meant that the unproductive single woman elided social categories of femaleness and femininity, marking her as transgressive regardless of whether she was associated with heterosexual or homosexual desire.

The ambiguous categories of single women meant that close textual analysis was required in order to understand the connection between her and transgressive sexuality.

But I still had to find a way of grouping texts, however provisionally. My research on *The*

¹⁶ Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 10.

¹⁷ Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 10.

Well of Loneliness had presented me with the problem of how to do this. I had initially conceived of a divide between modernist and realist fiction when considering female sexuality and censorship, but it became evident that this divide was not as clear cut as it initially seemed. Critics such as Nicola Humble, Faye Hammill and Ann Ardis were discussing women's writing in relation to another term: middlebrow. Both modernism and the middlebrow have been deployed as methods of understanding texts according to paradigms of cultural hierarchy. Modernist literature has been associated with radicalism, innovativeness, modernity, the urban; the middlebrow, meanwhile, has been described as conservative, realist, traditional, rural or suburban. Modernism and middlebrow initially appeared as two elements of a dialectical relationship; modernism was an elevated and serious cultural form while middlebrow had largely pejorative connotations. Thus, modernist authors such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were cast as literary pioneers and celebrated for their 'art', while middlebrow writers such as Ethel M. Dell, Arnold Bennett, E. M. Delafield and Netta Syrett were simply fodder for a burgeoning reading public that was unable to discriminate between good and bad fiction.¹⁸

Indeed, the discussion of interwar fiction has been repeatedly framed by discussion of the so-called 'battle of the brows'. But the debates about brow boundaries extended beyond literature to encompass broader conceptions of culture. One of the most influential figures in enhancing our understanding of culture has been the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Throughout his work, Bourdieu has explored the demarcation of high, low and middle culture, and how it is bound up in larger ideologies of class, taste and

¹⁸ The art/market divide that this opposition implies is elaborated on in Chapter One.

what he termed ‘cultural capital’: that is, the various attributes that individuals can acquire as a means of social mobility.¹⁹ In Bourdieu’s terms, then, modernist culture can be seen as a method by which the intellectual elite acquire power and status, while the middlebrow emerges as the realm of the aspirational middle classes. Bourdieu’s sociological approach, while highly influential, does not itself sufficiently explain the processes by which literature becomes demarcated along brow boundaries, and assigned positions within cultural hierarchies. Andreas Huyssen and John Carey have argued that modernist culture is marked by hostility towards mass culture (thus equating high culture with an intellectual elite and low culture with the uncritical masses), but this ‘great divide’ that Huyssen conceives of relies on positioning modernist art as *the* expression of high culture.²⁰ Critics such as Lawrence Rainey may have challenged this supposed hostility by tracking the ways in which modernism engaged with forms of mass culture, but they still understand modernism as a central tenet of high culture. Furthermore, as Ann Ardis argues, it was literary modernism that was championed by figureheads such as Ezra Pound as ‘*the aesthetic of modernity*’,²¹ and the dizzying social, political and technological changes of the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth became translated into experimental writing strategies which emphasised fragmentation and chaos. To some, literary modernism also became a tool for maintaining an elite culture in the face of a changing reading demographic. John Carey, for example, suggested that the ‘purpose of modernist writing [...] was to exclude [...]

¹⁹ The term ‘cultural capital’ was first coined in Bourdieu’s ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction (1973), but Bourdieu continued to discuss the concept in other works such as *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) and *The Forms of Capital* (1986).

²⁰ See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), p. viii; and John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

²¹ Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*, p. 115.

newly educated (or “semi-educated”) readers, and so to preserve the intellectual’s seclusion from the mass’.²² In this reading, middlebrow culture becomes problematic since it offers the opportunity to make high cultural forms accessible and thus threatens the elite status of modernism.

Several recent shifts in the studies of high, low and middle culture have resulted in a problematisation of the supposed antithetical and antagonistic relationship between modernism and the middlebrow. The assumption that each of these cultures are stable and monolithic entities has been discredited through an increasing emphasis on the plurality of modernist and middlebrow culture, marked in the semantic shift from the word ‘modernism’ to ‘modernisms’, from ‘middlebrow’ to ‘middlebrow cultures’. Critics are also increasingly engaging with, to use Lawrence Rainey’s term, the ‘institutions’ of literary culture, looking not only at fiction, but also at reading practices, print culture, magazines, readership, audiences and reception. There seems an increasing debt to the sociological approach of Bourdieu, in the move towards a better understanding of how brow boundaries interconnect with broader delineations of class, taste and cultural capital. Furthermore, assumptions about the relationship between modernist and popular cultures have been significantly revised. Critics such as Rainey and Michael North have argued for a more nuanced understanding of modernism’s relationship with mass culture, looking at how modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot engaged with forms of low culture.

Additionally, there has been a tentative acknowledgement that the terms modernist and middlebrow are deployed differently in discussions of literature. While

²² Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. vii.

modernist fictions has been categorised by their stylistic techniques and subject matter, works have often been associated with the middlebrow because of their authorship or readership. Where the middlebrow has been articulated as a particular form of literature, it has been seen as parasitical; Sean Latham has suggested that middlebrow authors have engaged with the more experimental techniques of modernist narratives in an effort to ‘stage’ sophistication,²³ but their texts are still perceived as remaining preoccupied with domestic subjects and middle-class everyday life. In a seminar at a recent *Modernist Studies Association* conference, it was suggested that the term middlebrow could not be used to describe form or style, and was not therefore comparable with modernism.²⁴ Clearly, discussion of literature in regards to middlebrow and modernist culture must remain aware of these complexities, and avoid the simplification of the terms into a dialectical relationship.

In light of these shifts in understandings of cultural hierarchies, is the grouping of texts into brow categories still enabling for critics? The answer is, perhaps surprisingly, yes. In amongst the reshaping of cultural hierarchies, there has been an undercurrent of criticism which has sought to challenge the synonymy of modernism with modernity, since this not only elevates modernism as the realm of high culture, but also reinforces certain gender significations. Rita Felski describes modernity as a ‘mythic narrative’ and suggests that, as such, ‘it is inevitably man who assumes the role of a collective subject of history, while woman can exist only as Other, as the object rather than the subject of historical narrative’.²⁵ Accordingly, Felski seeks to ‘unravel the complexities of

²³ See Sean Latham, *Am I a Snob?: Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

²⁴ ‘Middlebrow/Modernist Seminar’, *Modernist Studies Association*, 5-8 November 2009.

²⁵ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 7.

modernity's relationship to femininity through an analysis of its varied and competing representations'.²⁶ Ann Ardis follows suit by offering a collection of essays that explore 'women's varied experiences of modernity, experiences that include cultural practices such as selling and shopping, travel and world expositions, political and social activities, urban fieldwork and rural labour, and radical discourses of feminine sexuality, as well as experiments with literary form'.²⁷ Both Felski and Ardis explore representations of modernity for women outside of modernist culture. In reference to both modernist and middlebrow literary culture, as well as broader sociohistorical contexts, I pursue another aspect of this project. My research explores the single woman's experience of modernity, the opportunities it afforded her, and the constraints it imposed on her, while reassessing how modernity is deployed in fictions associated with modernist and middlebrow literary cultures.

I have chosen as broad a range of texts as possible in which to do this, but using a method of sampling rather than survey. The single woman appears so often in women's writing of the period that it would be tempting to adopt a survey approach, but close textual analysis is required in order to adequately demonstrate the nuances of her literary representations. I have, however, avoided focusing on particular authors on the basis that they are somehow exemplary of the cultural hierarchies they have been associated with, or especially adept at depicting the transgressions of the single woman. Instead, I have selected texts that allow me to explore the opposing ideologies that I am primarily concerned with and that inform the delineation of modernist and middlebrow culture –

²⁶ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 7.

²⁷ Ann Ardis, 'Introduction', in *Women's Experience of Modernity: 1875-1945*, ed. by Ann Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 1-10 (p. 1).

namely, bohemianism and domesticity, tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, and heterosexual and homosexual desire. This has allowed me to bring better known authors into relationships with largely forgotten ones, acknowledging how authorship has informed readings of texts in relation to cultural hierarchy, but emphasising parallels between canonical and neglected fictions. I remain tentative about the deployment of cultural categories, but do suggest that presumptions about the radicalism or conservatism of these texts have influenced their classification.

It should not be assumed that only women writers are concerned with the single woman. However, focusing on works by female, rather than male, authors allows for a reimagining of the relationship between women's writing and a supposed feminine sensibility. Rather than attempting to rescue the feminine from its derogatory connotations, examination of the single woman enables me to consider how femininity is destabilised in a range of fictions. This means that while my project expands our understanding of women's writing from the 1920s to the 1940s, it avoids doing so in the name of canonical revision. John Guillory has pointed out the flaws of criticising the literary canon for not being representative of marginal groups such as women and ethnic minorities, since this sustains a belief in the author's experience:

as the experience of a marginalised race, class or gender identity. The author returns in the critique of the canon, not only as the genius, but as the representative of a social identity.²⁸

The subtext of much of the criticism on women writers has been the reaffirmation of their literary value; consequently, considering female authors as part of the complex network of literary, social and political changes that inform cultural capital has been largely

²⁸ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 10.

absent. In discussions of cultural hierarchy, this poses the danger of either effacing differences between individual women authors, or creating arbitrary divisions. Thus, while Nicola Humble argues that revisionary processes of assimilating previously middlebrow writers into modernist cultures should be avoided in order to retain some sense of critical boundaries,²⁹ it could equally be argued that identifying women writers as modernist, rather than middlebrow, simply re-inscribes the modernist rhetoric that insists on the differentiation of those terms and positions modernism as the central expression of highbrow culture.

As part of my efforts to move away from a binary model of middlebrow and modernism, I have also grouped a number of texts outwith brow boundaries. Crime fiction of this period is littered with problematic female figures, making it a crucial element of this study, but the genre's position within cultural hierarchies is intensely contested. The development of the detective story, and the genre's canonisation of Poe's Auguste Dupin and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes at the turn of the twentieth century, meant that crime fiction came to be associated with ratiocination (a deductive process which emphasised intellect) and increasingly modern subjects. Consequently, the genre has been read as a form of low modernism by critics such as Maria DiBattista and Alison Light.³⁰ Golden age crime fiction, however, was considered a more conservative form. In 'The Simple Art of Murder' (1944), the American crime writer Raymond Chandler

²⁹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 25-6. It should be noted that Humble objects to this approach because modernism was 'a label that was applied retrospectively to the experimental writing of the early twentieth century, and would [...] have meant little to writers at the time' (p. 25).

³⁰ See Maria DiBattista, 'The Lowly Art of Murder: Modernism and the Case of the Free Woman', in *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889- 1939*, ed. by Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 176-93 and Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

attacked the conventions of golden age narratives, denouncing them because of their perceived preoccupation with domesticity and upper-middle-class values.³¹ These values have led to the discussion of novels by authors such as Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie in essays and conference papers that address middlebrow culture. These various approaches have not, however, been explicit enough in theorising how British golden age crime fiction sits awkwardly between traditional, patriarchal and class-orientated conceptions of British society, and the advancement of a cosmopolitan modernity in which categories of class and gender began to shift.

Golden age narratives have been characterised by resolution, the solving of the mystery and/or exposing of the criminal a sign of the restitution of social order. This has compounded the belief that golden crime fiction was conservative. However, as Gill Plain has argued, this may not necessarily close down ambiguity in the text.³² Analysis of the single woman in the crime novel offers the opportunity to challenge the perceived conservatism of the genre, since she encapsulates the same debates here as she does in texts associated with middlebrow and modernist culture: tensions concerning transgressive sexuality, but also opposing ideologies of bohemianism and domesticity, the country and the city, and tradition and modernity. Examining the single woman in the context of these ideologies enables me to further explore cultural hierarchies, but also challenge the perceived transatlantic divide in crime fiction that aligns the American hard-boiled tradition with urban modernity, and British golden age fiction with rural domesticity.

³¹ Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder', *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1944, pp. 53-9.

³² Plain suggests that focusing on the text itself, rather than just its conclusion, can illustrate the ambiguities of crime fiction. See Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 5.

Given the range of texts I am examining, I have had to find ways to limit the scope of the project, and I have done this geographically, adopting a largely British focus. Arguably, the social changes for women in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century offer a useful snapshot of how the world wars affected conceptions of female sexuality, subjectivity and emancipation; changes in these conceptions are certainly legible in the British fiction of this period. Furthermore, the geographical focus is particularly appropriate in reading fictions in the context of cultural hierarchies because of the geographical significations bound up in those hierarchies, especially in crime fiction and middlebrow culture. It was the British market that had a monopoly on golden age crime fiction (although American authors such as S. S. Dine and Ellery Queen also contributed to the development of the clue puzzle that was favoured at this time). However, golden age detective novels often drew on the social structures of the British class system, particularly in the country-house murder. Mary Grover also argues that a distinction between American and British middlebrow cultures should be made, partly because public debates concerning the middlebrow were rooted ‘in particular class structure[s]’ and partly because America had much ‘greater social fluidity’.³³ In light of this, the majority of texts I analyse in relation to crime and middlebrow fiction have English contexts and settings. Therefore, although I have selected works by English crime authors such as Dorothy L. Sayers and Dorothy Bowers, I have also chosen novels by the Scottish Josephine Tey and the New Zealander Ngaio Marsh that are set in England. Texts that I discuss in relation to middlebrow culture include those by the British authors Rosamond Lehmann and Antonia White, but they also include fictions by

³³ Mary Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), pp. 36-7.

the Creole writer Eliot Bliss, and Anglo-Irish writers Elizabeth Bowen and Molly Keane. All of the works are either set, at least in part, in England, or include a substantial body of English characters.

Geographical divisions are more problematic in terms of literary modernism. Modernist culture during the interwar period was cosmopolitan, with developments happening almost simultaneously in Paris, New York and London. Although the authors of Anglo-American modernist fiction have typically dominated discussions about literary modernism in general, these texts were often associated with metropolitan and international settings. Indeed, modernist criticism has considered the relationships among modernism, colonialism and cosmopolitanism.³⁴ Rather than imposing a divide that seems at odd with modernist culture itself, I have selected works by the English Sylvia Townsend Warner and Dorothy Richardson, along with texts by the American writers Djuna Barnes and Anaïs Nin. This enables me to explore more fully the single woman's experience of the metropolitan and cosmopolitan, while also questioning the wider geographical significations of the urban/rural divide in modernist and middlebrow cultures.

The delineation of brow boundaries in the literary culture of the period remains complex and shifting. Chapter One establishes how cultural hierarchies were demarcated during the early part of the twentieth century and tracks how they have been destabilised since. I begin by discussing the changing literary practices and productions in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth that directly informed

³⁴ See, for example, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); and Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses, eds, *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899 – 1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

conceptualisations of brow boundaries, and I indicate how recent criticism has problematised those conceptions. From there I progress to a fuller exploration of modernist and middlebrow literary culture in order to draw attention to the inconsistencies, contradictions and ambiguities of cultural hierarchies. I then consider golden age crime fiction in relation to both middlebrow and modernist culture, arguing that the detective story that dominated the genre during this period demonstrates how narratives can contain both modernist and middlebrow ideologies.

Chapter Two moves away from the literary to investigate sociohistorical contexts, looking at the stereotypes, archetypes and conceptions of the single woman. The chronological scope of this chapter moves beyond the fiction I am looking at, taking material from as early as 1880 and late as the 1940s. Typically, analysis of women's writing does not extend across such seemingly distinct modes and periods of literature (fin-de-siècle, Edwardian, interwar, postwar, and so on). Studies focused on interwar or Second World War fiction rarely step beyond these categories, and those that do, do not usually extend contextual analysis back into the nineteenth century.³⁵ The exceptions to this that have been the most influential in terms of broadening the parameters of my own work are Deborah Parsons' *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy* and Lesley Hall's *Sex, Gender and Social Change*.³⁶ Moving back into the

³⁵ The number of studies means it is impossible to cite them all, but some notable examples include: Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*; Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914-1939* (London: Virago, 1983); Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow*; Maroula Joannou, *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows: Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change, 1918-1938* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing For Their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940* (London: The Women's Press, 1987).

³⁶ Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

nineteenth century has been necessary for several reasons. Firstly, and perhaps most pragmatically, literary engagement with social and cultural anxieties is not always immediate: there may be a lapse of time before literature responds to particular developments. Secondly, much of the discourse informing the construction of categories of single women can be traced back to the close of the nineteenth century. Thirdly, it also allows me to consider the development of the conception of modernity, a development that is crucial in understanding both middlebrow and modernist fictions, and the tensions between them. This chapter then, combines social history with broader cultural narratives such as sexology and psychoanalysis, and is informed by judicial and political developments in order to demonstrate the myriad ways in which narratives of singlehood for women are constructed.

The subsequent three chapters return to literary considerations, this time in the form of close textual analysis. I begin in Chapter Three by looking at a selection of crime fiction texts, reading well-known golden age writers such as Marsh and Sayers alongside the post-war writer Josephine Tey and the largely forgotten Dorothy Bowers. Writers like Sayers and Marsh – considered two of the ‘Four Queens’ of the British detective novel – have been the subject of much literary criticism; authors like Tey and Bowers, however, have been rather neglected. I am especially interested in how the single woman is constructed in relation to psychoanalytic models of transgressive sexuality, and therefore focus on the texts’ portrayal of female killers, victims and witnesses. I also look at how these texts engage with both the urban and rural worlds, and delineate domesticity and bohemianism. This can be situated in relation to a broader tension between tradition and modernity, a tension which is crucial in understanding middlebrow and modernist culture.

In Chapter Four, I move onto an analysis of texts more usually associated with middlebrow culture. While the fictions discussed here can largely be termed realist, they are not without narrative experimentation. Indeed, the supposed tension between realist and modernist techniques is evident in the portrayal of the single woman, caught as she is between the same seemingly incompatible ideologies that inform crime narratives. Here, however, the single woman becomes a less coherent subject, and we begin to see the range of categories available for describing the single woman – children such as Louie from *Saraband* and Nanda from *Frost In May*; women who are not yet married – Sydney from *The Hotel* and Jessica from *Devoted Ladies*; those whose marriages have ended – the widower Jane in *Devoted Ladies* and the separated-but-not-quite-divorced Olivia Curtis of *The Weather in the Streets*.

Chapter Five discusses a selection of texts that are typically read as modernist literature. In these works, the notion of what constitutes the single woman begins to be even more broadly defined. Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* can be read as part of a tradition of sapphic modernism, but lesbian desire is problematised by how the narrative plays with subjectivity and transgressive sexuality. The other texts contain similarly unstable representations of lesbian sexuality. The eponymous heroine of Warner's *Lolly Willowes* remoulds the spinster as potentially lesbian, and the fantasy elements of the text has led to it being read as modernist, even though its narrative techniques (if not its subject matter) are largely realist. It is only in the later volumes of Dorothy Richardson's epic *Pilgrimage* that its protagonist Miriam Henderson becomes involved in a lesbian relationship, while much of the work is preoccupied with the single woman's negotiation of a public space for herself on the city streets. Nin's *Winter of Artifice* is perhaps the text that is most

difficult to assimilate into critical models of sapphic modernism, but its focus on interiority is connected to the single woman's estrangement from her self. These works share a narrative ideology that interweaves transgressive sexuality with the fragmentation of female subjectivity.

The value of my study lies not only in the scope of the texts I cover, but also in a fresh approach to the consideration of gender and sexual signification. Although the single woman in interwar fiction has not been entirely neglected, there has been a lack of consideration given to how she fits into the cultural hierarchies that have often dominated discussion of texts produced in this period. My concern over how the single woman sits uneasily between hetero- and homosexual discourses draws loosely on concepts taken from queer theory, but remains grounded in a literary approach. This contributes to the discussion of the female literary landscape during the 1920s to the 1940s, but, more significantly, points to how the fluidity of female sexuality finds a correlation with the fluidity of brow boundaries. Consequently, the single woman becomes a nexus for the debates concerning the delineation of cultural hierarchies. To begin the process of understanding this, I need to first elaborate on how these hierarchies have been demarcated, and I turn to the literary culture of the period in the next chapter.

Chapter One

Literary Culture: Modernism and the Middlebrow

Discussion of British and American literary culture in the interwar period, both in contemporary accounts and in a slew of studies since, has been dominated by the so-called battle of the brows. The need to draw discursive boundaries to distinguish among the wealth of different forms of literature being produced was nothing new; as Lawrence Rainey has observed, ‘the polarization between “high” and “low” literature had firmly crystallized’ by the Edwardian period.¹ Brow distinctions were often seen as a means of regulating literature, maintaining boundaries of taste between the bourgeoisie and the lower classes or, as John Carey puts in, between the intellectuals and the masses.² Carey’s monograph, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, charts the construction of the mass in Europe during the early part of the twentieth century by the intellectual elite through a range of philosophical and literary discourses, arguing that ‘modernist literature and art can be seen as a hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly large reading public created by late-nineteenth-century educational reforms’.³ Thus, for Carey, the experimental narratives of modernist literature prevent a new reading demographic from acquiring cultural capital, and therefore obstruct their social mobility.

While Carey’s account has been influential, it seemingly reiterates an unproblematic and rigid distinction between high and low culture. Yet the reading public Carey refers to was a shifting formation around the turn of the century. Mary Hammond rejects the notion of a ‘single [...] identifiable entity’ and instead points to ‘the nuances

¹ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 2.

² John Carey, *The Intellectual and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880 – 1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

³ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. vii.

between “popular cultures”⁴. She elaborates on this by exploring the position of literature in the public domain and the ‘social fluidity that it potentially enabled’, while exploring various reading avenues and practices, and the ‘cultural meanings attached’ to them.⁵ The attention Hammond pays to a wide range of networks concerning reading practices and modes of production is indicative of a recent shift towards a better understanding of the framework of cultural hierarchy. Critics such as Lawrence Rainey, Aaron Jaffe, Ann Ardis, Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton have remapped modernist terrain by exploring the intricacies of modernist culture, its readerships, authorships, receptions and propagandas.⁶ Nicola Humble, Janice Radway, Faye Hammill and Mary Grover, amongst others, have attended to different facets and expressions of middlebrow cultures.⁷ Consequently, new ways of reading brow debates have emerged which consider not only aesthetic categories, but also authorship, readership and market stratification.

In light of these developments, it may be more helpful, then, to ask not *if* modernism was a hostile reaction to mass culture, but *why* critics like Carey conceived of it in this way. In Britain, the changing face of the reading public from the late-nineteenth century onwards may well have contributed to the need to police boundaries between forms of literature. Carey asserts that laws such as the 1870 Educational Reform Act led

⁴ Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 11.

⁵ Hammond, *Literary Taste*, p. 10.

⁶ Ann Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton, eds, *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-1930* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*.

⁷ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Janice A. Radway, ‘The Scandal of the Middlebrow: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Class Fracture and Cultural Authority’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 89.4 (1990), 704-32; Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007); Mary Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).

to an exponential rise in literacy levels, especially among the lower classes.⁸ However, as Clive Bloom has pointed out, the act ‘formalised an already thriving elementary system and consolidated gains in literacy levels determined by informal and semi-formal processes in education that had existed a good half century previously’.⁹ Changes in print culture also impacted on reading habits. As Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier have observed, ‘the turn of the twentieth century saw a sea change in the world of Anglo-American book, newspaper and periodical publishing’, with a broader variety of formats, increased annual numbers and wider readerships.¹⁰ Bloom concurs, noting that the advances in printing, distribution and marketing meant that by ‘the 1880s the publishing world had become a publishing industry’.¹¹ This meant the working classes had both increased intellectual and physical access to reading. Carey’s study implies that the working classes were somehow especially vulnerable to corruption by inappropriate reading materials, and were interested only in the lowbrow and the salacious. Bloom details the emergence of a variety of newspapers now aimed at the lower-middle, working and servant classes, and notes a general shift in emphasis in newspapers as literacy rates improved, from morality and politics to entertainment.¹² These developments, then, seem to evoke nervousness over the lower classes’ inability to engage with the world in an intellectual fashion.

⁸ Carey, *The Intellectual and The Masses*, p. vii.

⁹ Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 32.

¹⁰ Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier, ‘Introduction’, in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. by Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-12 (p. 1).

¹¹ Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 10. As Hammond has described, these advances included the development of the rotary printing press, cheaper print material, improved methods of distribution, increased marketing avenues and new social spaces designated for reading (see Hammond, *Literary Taste*, p. 9). For a clearer understanding of transatlantic differences see Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier, eds, *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹² Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 33.

This nervousness is also evident in the debates concerning the reading public's access to fiction. The latter years of the nineteenth century heralded significant expansion in library services. Hammond argues that 'one of the main impulses of the [public] library movement' was to provide 'working people with an alternative space to the public house'; at the same time, there were worries over hygiene and the cleanliness of libraries, given working-class access to them.¹³ The material available to the working classes was also concerning. Hammond notes that although public libraries presented themselves as a 'serious male domain' they quickly began stocking novels, the reading of which was seen as a 'predominantly feminine' activity.¹⁴ Similar anxieties were apparent regarding circulating subscription libraries such as Mudie's and W. H. Smith's. These libraries initially monopolised the publishing industry, and were subscribed to largely by the middle classes. Despite accusations of 'peddling worthless fiction to bored ladies', Hammond suggests these services sold 'morality and conservatism', by providing their primarily female readership with books that were sanctioned and regulated.¹⁵ Accordingly, the library emerges as a site in which anxieties concerning class, gender and reading practices intersect.

Unease over reading practices also arose because of changes in the kind of fiction that was being produced in the period. Bloom argues that 'the unprecedented rise in mass literacy that had clearly become permanent by the late 1880s also created an unprecedented form: truly *popular* literature, marketed on a mass-commercial and

¹³ Hammond, *Literary Taste*, pp. 31-42.

¹⁴ Hammond, *Literary Taste*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Hammond, *Literary Taste*, p. 28.

modern basis'.¹⁶ The conception of popular literature as a critical and cultural category has proved problematic. The suggestion of synonymy with substantial sales is dismissed by Bloom, for whom the:

study of popular literature is a broader concept than the more narrow one of the bestseller and [one which] covers a wide range of ideological (especially sociological, political and aesthetic) areas of which the bestseller is only one acute example. Popular literature and the analogous area, popular fiction, need therefore no necessary relationship to mass sales; rather, they act as a focus for the intermixture of sociological and political questions, expressed through aesthetic means, found in the mass consumption of culture.¹⁷

For Bloom, as for Hammond, the term 'popular fiction' holds a range of potential significations. The sociological and political questions that Bloom refers to here, but does not quite articulate, might be concerned with how the category of popular literature is marked by a blurring of the class divisions that inform the delineation of brown boundaries. Hammond has referred to an 'art/market divide', which was a reaction to the 'increasing professionalisation of writing' during the latter half of the nineteenth century'.¹⁸ This divide works on the assumption that 'serious' writing is the realm of the intellectual artist, while 'popular' fiction was equated with the mass market. It also implicitly aligns art with the upper classes, and market with the lower. Both Bloom and Hammond challenge the rigidity of the opposition, with Hammond describing it as more like a 'negotiating table'.¹⁹ Bloom seemingly concurs, noting that while popular fiction can be attributed to the rise in literacy and associated with triviality, it was also a form that upper-class writers used to garner fame. Conversely, it was occasionally written by lower-class authors as a means of raising revenue to fund their more serious attempts at

¹⁶ Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 12.

¹⁷ Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Hammond, *Literary Taste*, p. 156.

¹⁹ Hammond, *Literary Taste*, p. 6.

literature.²⁰ The category, then, becomes even more oxymoronic with the emergence of the popular classic, which signified the marketing of popular literature ‘alongside the canon of serious literature when a superior reading “holiday” was required.’²¹ Consequently, popular fiction cannot be aligned with a distinctive and exclusive class identity, and hints at how cultural discourse cannot solely rely on authorship to signify how texts were read in relation to high and low spheres.

Although Bloom and Hammond are adept at examining the various debates concerning gender and class in terms of high and low culture, their references to the middlebrow are problematic. Bloom cites Robert Louis Stevenson, John Buchan and Arthur Conan Doyle’s fiction as the ‘work of classic middlebrow taste’, seemingly denying its potential status as serious literature, while neglecting to specify what distinguished it from other popular fiction of the time. He also implies that the middlebrow is itself a discrete category defined by its readership.²² Similarly, Hammond labels Arnold Bennett a ‘professional’ middlebrow (are there amateur middlebrows?), because of his popularity and the way in which he was derided by the literary elite. Furthermore, she argues against a binary opposition between ‘popular middlebrow writers and highbrow literary purists’ but does not seem to recognise the problematic of reading the popular and the middlebrow as synonymous and does not acknowledge how authorship was only one component in how brow boundaries have been delineated.²³ The instability of class divisions in both Hammond and Bloom’s analyses points towards increasingly fractured class identities. I propose that the inability to theorise the

²⁰ Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 12.

²¹ Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 16.

²² Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 16.

²³ Hammond, *Literary Taste*, p. 190.

relationship between middlebrow and popular literary culture in discussion of brow boundaries means that the understanding of middlebrow as a literal middle ground which reiterated middle-class concerns can be discredited.

The conceptualisation of three distinct spheres of low, middle and high culture, each carrying its own distinctive set of class and social values, begins to appear increasingly implausible. This, in turn, raises the question of whether these divisions were as clear cut during the period itself as some critics may have led us to believe. Although precise dates pinpointing when modernism emerged are debated, broadly speaking, its roots can be traced back to the late-nineteenth century, and the term was in common usage by the early-twentieth century. The first known reference in print to the middlebrow was long thought to be in a 1925 edition of *Punch* magazine until it was recently discovered in a 1924 edition of the Irish *Freeman's Journal*.²⁴ Either way, Janice A. Radway has described how the term had 'clearly moved into common parlance by the mid-1930s'.²⁵ While the foundations of both modernist and middlebrow culture had been laid before the interwar period, it seems that it was at this point in time that the two terms became staples of literary discourse and began to reshape understandings of not only brow boundaries, but also broader conceptions of the delineation of class and taste. Yet, even in the early years of the twentieth century, distinctions between the different fields of culture were debated, particularly in terms of authorship. Virginia Woolf, for instance,

²⁴ 'Defining the Middlebrow', *Middlebrow: An Interdisciplinary Transatlantic Research Network* <<http://www.middlebrow-network.com/DefiningtheMiddlebrow.aspx>> [accessed 9 November 2010]

²⁵ Radway, 'The Scandal of the Middlebrow', p. 708.

famously and rather wittily took exception to a review that neglected to identify her as highbrow writer.²⁶

What is certain is that the conceptual framework of cultural hierarchy has changed dramatically since the time of Carey's study in the early nineties. Nevertheless, analysis of interwar fiction has persisted in categorising texts produced according to brow boundaries, even if critics have not always been in agreement about where these boundaries fell. But in recent years a variety of new taxonomies have emerged in literary and cultural criticism, the names of which signify the paradoxical relationships among low, middle and high culture. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei have challenged the distinction between middlebrow and modernism by employing the term 'domestic modernism' to describe the way in which the tradition of the typically middle-class domestic novel can be found in even high modernism.²⁷ Kristin Bluemel, meanwhile, has challenged the perception of a modernist heyday in the 1920s by coining the term 'intermodernism' to refer to a range of 1930s and 1940s literature. The term is part of an effort to deconstruct the high/low binary, linking this new critical category to 'working-class and working-middle-class cultures', political radicalism, and 'non-canonical, even "middlebrow" or "mass" genres'. As Bluemel argues, intermodernism presents the opportunity to refigure 'the ways we think about relations between elite and common, experimental and popular, urban and rural, masculine and feminine, abstract and realistic,

²⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 113-9. See pp. 45-7 for detailed discussion.

²⁷ Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, eds, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel and E. H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

colonial and colonised'.²⁸ The collapsing of these binaries enables us to envisage plural modernisms and middlebrows, whereby the very space not just between those categories, but actually *in* them, is questioned and destabilised.

This has allowed for increased insight into the dynamics of fiction and brow boundaries, and grounds the literary in its broader cultural contexts. Although I have chosen to group the range of women's fiction I discuss under the headings of 'modernist' and 'middlebrow', I do so provisionally, using those terms as a starting point from which to interrogate those taxonomies. As I will demonstrate, literary and cultural categories can obscure the innovations, diversities and ruptures in and between texts; analysis across these categories, then, not only illustrates the variations and affinities between fictions, but also recognises the fluidity of cultural hierarchies. A text like Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926), although clearly working at a level of modernist fantasy, still retains some of the realist conventions we find in a novel like Antonia White's *Frost in May* (1933), whereas some of the more lyrical passages from Eliot Bliss's *Saraband* (1931) share an affinity with the stream-of-consciousness technique evident in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915-67). But the identification of these literary techniques is not enough to neatly pack these books away in critical categories. Both Anaïs Nin's and Djuna Barnes's fiction can be labelled modernist, and both Molly Keane and Rosamond Lehmann can be regarded as middlebrow writers, but this does not mean we cannot suggest that their work offers different maps of the same terrain. I therefore do not wish to imply that the way in which I have grouped the selection of texts is definitive; rather, it allows me to track transgressive female sexuality to demonstrate the fluidity not only of

²⁸ Kristin Bluemel, 'Introduction', in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. by Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

categories of single women, but also of cultural hierarchies. In addition, I can challenge the way in which individual writers have been categorised and the influence this has had over the way they are read.

This approach is complemented and enhanced by recuperating a specific genre into the discussion: namely, crime fiction. Clive Bloom suggests that the notion of genre as we understand it only arose because of the expansion of popular fiction during the early part of the twentieth century; before ‘the First World War there was simply too little popular fiction to need categorising’, but by the mid-1920s classification by genre was ‘an accomplished fact’.²⁹ Crime narratives existed long before this fact, but during the period these narratives were assimilated into a distinct (and bestselling) genre. Given the multiple meanings attached to popular writing, crime fiction becomes bound up in conflicting ideologies of mass and middlebrow culture. At the same time, as Maurizio Ascari has argued:

from its inception, the discourse of *detective* fiction discarded the sensational lineage of the new genre, grounding its literary status on its association with scientific methods and highbrow literature.³⁰

By the 1860s, crime fiction had become associated with the sensation novel, a description applied to crime narratives that ‘dealt in nervous, psychological, sexual and social shocks, and had complicated plots involving bigamy, adultery, seduction, fraud, forgery, blackmail, kidnapping and, sometimes, murder’.³¹ The development of the detective story during the closing years of the nineteenth century, with its increased emphasis on the

²⁹ Bloom, *Bestsellers*, p. 86.

³⁰ Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1 (emphasis mine).

³¹ Lyn Pykett, ‘The Newgate Novel and Sensation Fiction, 1830-1868’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 19-40 (p. 33).

rational, meant that it was detective fiction (rather than crime fiction per se) that ‘achieved the full status of a literary genre’ by the interwar years.³² It seems, then, that golden age crime fiction of the 1920s to the 1940s lends itself particularly well to analysis of cultural hierarchy, since the debates concerning high and low literature that marked cultural discourse at this time had a particular resonance for the genre.

Accordingly, this chapter introduces the categories of modernism, middlebrow and crime fiction, and teases out the disparities and similarities among these different fields of literary production. Beginning with the notion of modernism as an expression of high culture, I examine how this definition has been problematised by recent criticism before tracing the problematic conceptualisation of middlebrow culture, especially in relation to modernist discourse. Finally, I scrutinise the position of golden age crime fiction in high and middle culture. Although the focus of my study is mainly on British texts, I hope to illuminate the broader cultural contexts at work that will inform my discussion of literary representations of the single woman during the period.

Modernism

Make it New³³

The difficulty in examining modernism lies largely in the problem of distilling such an expansive, multi-disciplinary phenomenon into a coherent definition. Deborah Parsons defines modernism as a ‘break from [...] conventional understanding of consciousness and representation’ and a move ‘towards greater aesthetic self-reflexivity and

³² Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, p. 3.

³³ An infamous injunction attributed to Ezra Pound and adopted as a mantra for high modernism.

abstraction’, with ‘an emphasis on new stylistic and formal strategies for the rendering of modern life’.³⁴ Ezra Pound’s directive to ‘make it new’ emphasises the stylistic innovation that Parsons sees as fundamental to a preliminary understanding of modernism. Both Pound and Parsons refer to an ideology that rejected realism in favour of aesthetic experimentation, so as to explore and fracture human subjectivity in response to ‘the conditions and energies of the [...] time; an age of rapid commercial, scientific and technological development’. At the same time, Parsons acknowledges that the definition is a broad one, given that the term modernism ‘subsumes a range of distinct avant-garde movements, including Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Expressionism, as well as the diverse and divergent aesthetic and ideological outlooks of individual writers and artists’.³⁵ It would be misleading to imply that there is a critical consensus about the constitution of modernism, but Parsons’ definition is a useful starting point. Pound’s bold assertion that modernism must be ‘new’ (and therefore original) is crucial in illuminating why some have argued that modernist ideology presented itself as a radical and elevated cultural form. The notion that modernism was a coherent culture, however, is inaccurate. Many different personalities and ideologies were at work within modernism, and Anglo-American literary modernism was no exception. This incarnation of modernist culture was neither unified nor consistent; as Parsons goes on to point out, it in fact incorporated both the ‘objectivist focus’ of ‘high modernism’ expounded by Pound and T. S. Eliot and the ‘subjectivist focus concerned with the fragmentation and flux of modern consciousness, as manifest in the interior realism and

³⁴ Deborah Parsons, ‘Modernism’, in *Encyclopaedia of Women’s Writing, 1900-1950*, ed. by Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin and Ashlie Sponenberg (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2006), pp. 167-9 (p. 167).

³⁵ Parsons, ‘Modernism’, p. 167.

associated stylistic techniques of writers such as Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce'.³⁶ Pound's posturing modernist rhetoric can be read as an attempt to gloss over the range of (occasionally conflicting) aesthetic ideologies and idiosyncrasies in modernist culture. Parsons' retrospective view is indicative of a recent trend in modernist criticism that, as Ann Ardis argues, 'emphasises the plurality of modernisms and the countercurrents, disagreements, and contestations *within* modernisms'.³⁷ This revisionism moves beyond limiting definitions of modernist culture to look for fissures within modernist dogma.

The revisionism of new modernist studies also interrogates the relationship between modernist and mass culture. The supposed hostility of Anglo-American literary modernism in the pre-war years towards the mass has been explored by various critics, appearing indicative of a wider European phenomenon of anxiety over the increased literacy of the lower classes, and their susceptibility to propaganda.³⁸ A radical sense of aesthetics could be one of modernism's biggest weapons in working to exclude the masses; the experimental narrative strategies of its fiction departed from realist convention in an effort to dislocate and disorientate, effectively limiting the newly literate reader's ability to understand it. This argument, however, presupposes that realism and modernism are locked in an antithetical, binary relationship. Ann Ardis examines this conceptualisation of realism and modernism, as espoused by literary modernists such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.³⁹ In this figuration, modernism and realism become aligned with low and high art, respectively. Ardis follows the lead of Lynne Hapgood and Nancy

³⁶ Parsons, 'Modernism', p. 168

³⁷ Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*, p. 4

³⁸ See Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* and Bloom, *Bestsellers* for further discussion of this.

³⁹ Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*.

Paxton, who reconceive of realism and modernism as ‘literary techniques’, rather than ‘conflictual literary movements’, in order to demonstrate how they ‘interacted, complemented and co-existed with each other, often within the same text’.⁴⁰ Rather than attempting to recoup particular English texts into the category of modernism, Hapgood and Paxton examine a selection of these texts ‘outside’ of it, although Paxton does acknowledge that in doing this they simultaneously aim to ‘promote a reconsideration of the canon of English “high modernism” and a reassessment of significant “non-modernist” novels jettisoned from the canon before they were forgotten’.⁴¹ Instead of arguing that these texts should be either demoted in or promoted to canonical status, they focus on how these texts can challenge the equation of modernism with modernity.

Hapgood and Paxton’s study works to complicate the modernist/realist binary that Ardis suggests has simplified the “scene” of British literary production in the early twentieth century’. In Ardis’ eyes, this simplification led to what she describes as ‘the classic modernist exaggeration of a “great divide” between high and low culture’.⁴² She refers here to a phrase coined by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide*, a text in which Huyssen traces the conflict between high and low art. For Huyssen, this divide arises out of ‘the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture’.⁴³ The central preoccupation of the study is how modernism defined its own:

⁴⁰ Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton, ‘Preface’, in *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-1930*, ed. by Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. vii-ix (p. vii).

⁴¹ Nancy Paxton, ‘Eclipsed by Modernism’, in *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-1930*, ed. by Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 3-21 (p. 3).

⁴² Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*, p. 116.

⁴³ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. viii.

identity in relation to cultural phenomena: traditional bourgeois high culture (especially the traditions of romantic idealism and of enlightened realism and representation), but also vernacular and popular culture as it was increasingly transformed into modern commercial mass culture.⁴⁴

As Huyssen highlights, high culture was not always associated with experimental writing, but at the same time, his idea of a great divide maintains modernism as a fixed, coherent expression of high culture, regardless of how it manoeuvred itself there.⁴⁵ While Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt acknowledge the usefulness of focusing on the perceived division between high and low culture in *Marketing Modernisms*, they, like Ardis, have clear reservations over Huyssen's argument. Part of their objection is ideological; they too reject the perceived monolithism of the Great Divide and instead work towards the recognition of a 'plurality of modernisms' that Ardis identifies as a concern of recent criticism.⁴⁶ Their collection of essays, *Marketing Modernisms*, continues to consider the relationship between modernism and mass culture, but with a special focus on the increasingly commercialised mass, as they seek to demonstrate that the notion of 'marketing modernisms' is not as 'oxymoronic' as it may first seem.⁴⁷

Indeed, materialist approaches to modernism and marketing have become increasingly common, and one of the most notable examples is Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism*. Again, taking up Huyssen's ideas, Rainey constructs the relationship between modernism and mass culture as rather more complex, acknowledging that while modernism did 'retreat from the domain of public culture'; it

⁴⁴ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, pp. viii-ix.

⁴⁵ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. viii,

⁴⁶ Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt, 'Introduction: Marketing Modernisms', in *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonisation, Rereading*, ed. by Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 1-13 (p. 6).

⁴⁷ Dettmar and Watt, 'Introduction', p. 2.

also continued to ‘overlap and intersect with the public realm in a variety of contradictory ways’. These contradictory ways include modernism’s engagement with matters concerning ‘the fate of aesthetic autonomy, authorial self-construction in advancing modernity, and the troublesome place of literary elites in public culture’; in other words, how modernism positioned itself as antithetical to mass culture, but benefited from the new consumer and marketing ideologies found there.⁴⁸ As Rainey elaborates:

new strategies for reputation-building – involving theatricality, spectacle, publicity, and novel modes of cultural marketing and media manipulation – responded to increasingly international cultural interchanges, the growing prominence of the early mass media, the rising pressure of advertising, the unprecedented fusion of information and entertainment and the challenges presented by a dense, highly differentiated array of institutional arenas in which to speak to an increasingly fragmented public.⁴⁹

Reputation-building was essential in order for modernist writers to position themselves as authentic, artistic voices, able to grapple with the complexities of the human subject. The advances in printing and publishing at the turn of the century, along with the marketing and media developments that Rainey outlines above, opened new avenues for doing this. Yet, in engaging with their publics, modernists could be construed as compromising their elevated status. Joyce Wrexler addresses the ‘contradictory ideologies of authorship’ that inform this specific debate; contrasting the Romantic artist writing their inner vision with the Victorian author writing for a living, Wrexler summarises how ‘art was aligned with writing for oneself, martyrdom, and self-expression, while sales were aligned with writing for an audience, professionalism and rhetoric’.⁵⁰ Modernism, then, needed to

⁴⁸ Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Joyce Wrexler, ‘Selling Sex as Art’, in *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonisation and Rereading*, ed. by Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996),

negotiate its way through this dichotomy, taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by technological and economic advances while maintaining its elitist reputation and privileging aesthetics.

For Rainey, this was achieved through the practice of patronage. Rainey cites the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as the moment which:

signalled the decisive entry of modernism into the public sphere via an identifiable process of commoditisation, via its transformation into a product whose value could now be assayed within the framework of several overlapping institutions, an institutional context whose shape and structure have been left largely unexamined.⁵¹

The 'overlapping institutions' Rainey refers to comprise 'a corpus of collecting, marketing, and discursive practices'. What Rainey has pinpointed is the moment when modernist texts became products. Tracking the publication of *Ulysses*, from the 1,000 copies that were privately printed in an effort to evade transatlantic obscenity laws, to the deluxe edition printed by the Paris publishing figure, Sylvia Beach, at Shakespeare & Company (complete with a tiered pricing system and higher royalty rate for Joyce) Rainey argues that modernism's engagement with the public sphere was not direct or unmediated, but a 'retreat into a divided world of patronage, investment and collecting'.⁵² Marketing early editions of modernist texts to wealthy purchasers meant that the commoditisation of literary modernism transformed it into an exclusive product, available only to an elite class of buyer.

This policy of patronage seems to have paid dividends for Anglo-American male modernism. Aaron Jaffe's observation that for 'all the revisionist work about the canon

pp. 91- 108 (p. 91). Wrexler's argument is part of the wider debates concerning the art/market divide that Hammond refers to.

⁵¹ Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p. 44.

⁵² Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p. 75.

during the last decades, only a dozen or so names and texts remain in heavy rotation when modernism is discussed' still rings true.⁵³ Eliot, Pound and Joyce are especially prominent among them. Rainey's study, in essence, reflects this and, indeed, Jaffe takes issue with the way in which materialist accounts of patronage within modernism focus on individual, canonical texts like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* (1922). Instead, Jaffe advocates a renewed focus on 'the collaborative promotion of modernist idiom [...] documented in modernist limited editions, small magazines, little reviews, introductions, editing, anthologies, and other cultural furnishings'.⁵⁴ This would mean a shift in attention away from the discordances of literary modernism to its harmonies, refocusing on the way it celebrated and re-inscribed its own plurality through the collaborative processes that shaped its literary production. Maria DiBattista has similarly highlighted what she terms the 'forgotten associations' in literary culture during this time.⁵⁵ Hapgood, meanwhile, suggests that these associations were 'actively hidden and resisted in misconceived support of the modernist project of literary segregation'.⁵⁶ Hapgood draws further attention to what is at stake with the increased visibility of such associations:

While, for instance, it is acceptable, even exciting, to learn that Ezra Pound edited T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, it is disconcerting to discover that Conrad deferred so readily to Galsworthy's opinions. Why is the first fact so well known and the second very much less so, if at all?⁵⁷

In considering the collaborative relationships between three authors usually perceived as among the leaders of literary modernism (Pound, Eliot and Conrad) and one author

⁵³ Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Maria DiBattista, 'Introduction', in *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889- 1939*, ed. by Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 3-19 (p. 18).

⁵⁶ Lynne Hapgood, 'Transforming the Victorian', in *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-1930*, ed. by Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002), pp. 22-39 (p. 25).

⁵⁷ Hapgood, 'Transforming the Victorian', p. 24.

positioned within the realist tradition (Galsworthy), Hapgood not only suggests a collaborative process between modernism and realism, but also allows us to question the literary value and cultural capital we ascribe to texts and authors both inside and outside of modernism. Hapgood, Paxton and Ardis may recognise realism as a constructed enemy of modernism, but in turning our attention to another of its supposed adversaries, the middlebrow, we can interrogate further modernism's radicalism and its privileged position within cultural hierarchies.

Middlebrow

If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dare calls me 'middlebrow' I will take my pen and stab him, dead.⁵⁸

Virginia Woolf, positioned by many as a pioneer of British modernism, made her feelings about the middlebrow quite clear in an unsent letter to the *New Statesman* that she drafted in 1932 and which appeared posthumously in her collection of essays entitled *The Death of the Moth*. Having taken umbrage at a recent review of her work that neglected to describe her as a highbrow writer, Woolf penned a letter that at first set out to distinguish herself as a wholly and irrevocably highbrow artist, and quickly moved on to launch a humorous but nonetheless devastating attack on the increasingly visible middlebrow.

Woolf's unsent missive highlights how the term middlebrow has traditionally occupied a problematic position within discussions of cultural hierarchies. Despite the supposed hostility between high and low art, Woolf recognises that they are hardly

⁵⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 113-9 (p. 119).

mutually exclusive concepts: ‘they cannot exist apart, when one is the complement and other side of the other’.⁵⁹ Woolf’s comments represent a marked departure from the hostility shown by artists such as Pound, instead implying that the radicalism of modernism was only possible in relation to the ordinariness of low culture. The emergence of the middlebrow threatened to interrupt this division by its status as ‘betwixt and between’.⁶⁰ Janice A. Radway has indicated how mistrust of the middlebrow was largely due to perceived aesthetic rivalries, arguing that what seemed to be at issue was ‘the cultural miscegenation produced when high cultural products were offered using low cultural methods’.⁶¹ Middlebrow culture was thus seen as a set of aspirational attitudes and tastes, seeking to position itself between high and low forms of culture. Modernism had sought to exclude the masses from understanding high art through its aesthetic ideologies; it feared that the middlebrow took those ideologies and made them accessible.

This implies that reading middlebrow fiction offered the middle and lower classes the opportunity to accrue cultural capital. Catherine Turner has argued that ‘middlebrow consumers’ thought they could ‘improve their cultural position by “reading up”’.⁶² This raises the question of how (or even if) we can define middlebrow fiction in the first place. The middlebrow consumers that Turner refers to are ambiguous figures. Do they consume middlebrow products, or are they themselves middlebrow? If we return to Woolf’s letter, we see the difficulty in providing an answer. She asks:

Why is it that while we, the highbrows, never buy a middlebrow book, or go to a middlebrow lecture, or read, unless we are paid for doing so, a middlebrow

⁵⁹ Woolf, ‘Middlebrow’, p. 115.

⁶⁰ Woolf, ‘Middlebrow’, p. 115

⁶¹ Radway, ‘The Scandal of the Middlebrow’, p. 708.

⁶² Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), p. 38.

review, they, on the contrary, take these middlebrow activities so seriously? Why, I ask, (not of course on the wireless), are you so damnably modest? Do you think that a description of your lives, as they are, is too sordid and too mean to be beautiful? Is that why you prefer the middlebrow version of what they have the impudence to call real humanity? – this mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calves-foot jelly?⁶³

The term middlebrow is deployed not only in reference to novels, but also non-fictional writing, public speeches and, implicitly, a range of other ‘middlebrow activities’. At the same time, as we can see from the epigram opening this section, Woolf also uses it to categorise a particular kind of person, one that we might infer to be a corollary of a ‘highbrow’. These categories may indeed be defined in part by rival aesthetics, but it becomes clear that middlebrow aesthetics cannot be understood in the same way that modernist ones are. While literary modernism has been largely defined by its narrative strategies, the literary middlebrow appears defined by its texts, authors, readers and audiences, as much as its stylistics, the significations of which are difficult to disentangle from one another. For Woolf, the middlebrow aesthetic is decidedly banal. In her vivid description, the ‘sticky slime of calves-foot jelly’ stands for the realist and reassuring content of fiction associated with the middlebrow. But the notion of realism as an antagonistic literary technique to modernism has been re-evaluated in the years since Woolf’s tirade. Moreover, the mixture of geniality and sentimentality that Woolf refers to appears to confuse realism and the middlebrow with popular romance. Most problematic of all is how Woolf assumes that the highbrow is a homogenous collective and presumes that she can speak for it.⁶⁴

⁶³ Woolf, ‘Middlebrow’, p. 117.

⁶⁴ Even Woolf’s own identity as modernist writer can be called into question. For example, Nancy Paxton suggests that British scholarship has located Woolf ‘inside’ modernism, while North American criticism has fixed her ‘outside’ of it (see Paxton, ‘Eclipsed by Modernism’, p. 8).

While Woolf's letter glosses over the complex significations of the middlebrow, her objections are illuminating since they hint at the class ideologies often at play in discussion of cultural hierarchies. While she seems to cast aspersions on the middlebrow depiction of the lower class, there remains the feeling that it was the middlebrow's perceived articulation of middle-class concerns that irked Woolf. The positioning of the middlebrow as an expression of middle-class culture was largely due to the explosion in the popularity of book clubs and circulating libraries during the interwar period. The first book club in Britain was the Times Book Club, established in 1904, while the first in America, the 'Book of-the-Month' club, began in New York in 1926.⁶⁵ Stacey Gillis has described how the commercial circulating library 'rose to prominence between the wars, with the first of these being the Boots Book Lending Service, established in 1899 at the suggestion of the then head of Boots' wife, Florence Boot, with W. H. Smith quickly following suit'.⁶⁶ Kathy Hopewell suggests that Boots library 'supplied middlebrow texts to generally middle-class patrons, and publications such as the *London Mercury* and the *Daily Mail* [...] were full of book reviews to guide the discerning but less adventurous reader'.⁶⁷ Accordingly, book clubs and libraries were simultaneously seen as the dominion of both middle-class taste and middlebrow literary culture.

Janice Radway suggests that book clubs fed into American debates in the 1920s concerning 'the standardisation of culture'.⁶⁸ Standardisation was particularly antithetical

⁶⁵ Ashlie Sponenberg, 'Book Clubs', in *Encyclopaedia of Women's Writing 1900-1950*, ed. by Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin and Ashlie Sponenberg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 18-20 (p. 19).

⁶⁶ Stacey Gillis, 'Libraries', in *Encyclopaedia of Women's Writing 1900-1950*, ed. by Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin and Ashlie Sponenberg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 145-7 (p. 145).

⁶⁷ Kathy Hopewell, 'Brows', in *Encyclopaedia of Women's Writing 1900-1950*, ed. by Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin and Ashlie Sponenberg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 31-3 (p. 32).

⁶⁸ Radway, 'The Scandal of the Middlebrow', p. 705.

to constructions of high art, as Radway elaborates:

[s]ince ‘culture’ had increasingly been defined as something high and therefore ‘sacralised’ in the period 1850-1900, its constituent artworks had been conceived as things unique, inherently distinct, and therefore incomparable. Standardisation, then, was understood to be diametrically opposed to the notion of culture because it reduced a diverse collection of exceptional objects to a serial string of repeated instances of an abstract formula, standard, or norm.⁶⁹

Because of the power of their selection committees to dictate the fiction that members should be reading, book clubs were deemed to be shaping the tastes of the reading public in a way that damaged great art. Radway’s study reads these debates as intrinsic to the concern over middlebrow culture. Although based on an American model, similar anxiety was evident in Britain, particularly in regards to fictions that were read as middlebrow. This is evident in Q. D. Leavis’ study, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). Leavis objects to the selection committees of organisations such as the Book Society and Book Guild, arguing that by ‘championing second-rate literature’ they effectively create a ‘standardisation of taste’ that depends upon a ‘middlebrow standard of value’.⁷⁰ Thus, the middlebrow becomes equated with ordinariness, and the fiction assigned to it is seen as representing a lesser standard of literature. Leavis’ condemnation also extends to the middlebrow demographic, as she dourly proclaims: ‘the book-borrowing public has acquired the reading habit while somehow failing to exercise any critical intelligence about its reading’.⁷¹ It was the reading public, then, that perpetuated inferior fiction that catered to the lowest common denominator.

Although attacks by figures such as Woolf and Leavis enable us to investigate what the middlebrow as a cultural category might mean, it remains unclear if

⁶⁹ Radway, ‘The Scandal of the Middlebrow’, p. 705.

⁷⁰ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), pp. 22-4.

⁷¹ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 7.

middlebrow, as a term, is particularly helpful in describing the aesthetics of a text. However, there have been a number of studies that have attempted to define middlebrow as a fictional form. Nicola Humble has described it as a 'hybrid form', composed from the conventions of 'the romance and country-house novel, through domestic and family narratives, to detective and children's literature and the adolescent Bildungsroman'.⁷² Consequently, she sees middlebrow plots as typically revolving around middle-class people, in easily recognisable, domestic settings. There are other critics whose work suggests, albeit more implicitly, that the middlebrow can be understood as a mode of fiction. Alison Light, for example, refers to 'the middlebrow novel between the wars',⁷³ while Nicola Beauman's wide-ranging account of women's fiction, *A Very Great Profession*, understands middlebrow fiction as the work 'of English middle-class women during the period between two world wars'.⁷⁴ Beauman's study may not be as academically theorised as Humble's observations are – she differentiates novels with a female tone (characterised by 'little action and less histrionics') from those with 'a strong male thrust'⁷⁵ – and her definition of female is problematic by today's standards of feminist and gender theory. Nonetheless, Beauman, along with Humble and Light, corroborate the conception of the middlebrow as a feminine mode of fiction that stood in contrast to the perceived masculinity of modernism. This conception is based not just on literary techniques, but also on gendered readings of the two cultural forms. This suggests that it might be more useful to ask not if the middlebrow novel exists, but why a novel

⁷² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 4.

⁷³ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 208.

⁷⁴ Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914 – 1939* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 3.

⁷⁵ Beauman, *A Very Great Profession*, p. 5.

might be labelled middlebrow. This forms part of a wider dialogue in my work about the relationship between modernism and the middlebrow: a relationship that might be even more clearly understood if we consider the clash of modernism and the middlebrow in a particular genre of fiction.

Crime Fiction

major examples of crime fiction not only create an idea (or a hope, or a dream) about controlling crime, but both realise and validate a view of the world, one shared by the people who become the central audience to buy, read and find comfort in a particular variety of crime fiction.⁷⁶

Stephen Knight's imagining of crime fiction as a salve for the reader, as a fantasy in which the conventions of the genre firstly disrupt the social order then restore it, suggests an inherently conservative mode of fiction, one which invites the reader to become part of its literary community. The 'comfort' offered by crime fiction could partly account for the genre's soaring popularity in the interwar years. While the battle of the brows was being played out in the field of transatlantic cultural discourse, the after-effects of the military battles on the European landscape during the First World War were being felt acutely, particularly in Britain. Against the backdrop of a precarious national security and in the looming shadow of Fascism, Gill Plain's assertion that crime fiction is about 'confronting and taming the monstrous' takes on politically loaded connotations.⁷⁷ Thus Knight's argument becomes particularly persuasive in an interwar context.

⁷⁶ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 2.

⁷⁷ Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 3.

As a genre, however, crime fiction is an expansive one. Conclusions about its sociological functions, especially those which imply that the form is inherently conservative, are in danger of closing off the complexities of the genre. It can also obscure the complex relationship that crime fiction has had with cultural hierarchy. The Newgate stories of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and the sensation novels of the late nineteenth, meant that crime narratives were modes of entertainment for the working and/or lower-middle classes. The popularity of these sub-genres meant that crime fiction was not necessarily seen as ‘literature’. The increasing dominance of the form by detective fiction changed this. Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841) has been widely credited as the first detective story and Emile Gaboriau’s *Monsieur Lecoq* (1868) was also crucial in developing the sub-genre. The popularity of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes was cemented by his appearance in a series of short stories in *The Strand* in the 1890s and he went on to become one of the most influential literary detectives in Britain. The reputation of detective fiction was enhanced by a series of critical essays on the sub-genre, including being R. A. Freeman’s ‘The Art of Detective Stories’ (1924), Dorothy L. Sayers’ introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery, Horror* (1928) and H. Douglas Thomson’s *Masters of Mystery: A Study of the Detective Story* (1931).⁷⁸ As Ascari argues, the ‘increasing tendency to disparage the nineteenth-century crime tradition in order to promote the more recent “scientific” developments of the genre’ – namely, the application of deductive reasoning – meant that the literary status of detective fiction was secured.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, p. 3.

However, as Maria DiBattista has observed, '[n]owhere is the boundary line between high and low culture more finely drawn than at the crossover between "literature" and detective fiction'.⁸⁰ Although DiBattista suggests that detective fiction was implicitly anti-modernist in its dependence on portraying human character as 'objective, readable, and knowable',⁸¹ she simultaneously acknowledges it was initially in line with early modernism in its sexual depictions, in terms of the 'marriage question' and women in both the public and private sphere'.⁸² Detective fiction is problematic in the context of cultural hierarchies because it can be at once modernist and anti-modernist. This paradox emerges even more clearly in British golden age detective fiction. Dominated by the clue-puzzle or the whodunit, a form that was characterised by multiple suspects and an emphasis on rational detection, these narratives invited readers to take part in the deductive process, meaning that that it has been positioned as a 'form of popular modernism' by Alison Light.⁸³ Many novels were governed by the rules of 'Fair Play' that were codified in 1929, rules which were 'grounded in the notion that the reader should, at least in theory, be able to solve the crime at the heart of a story of detection, and for this reason should have access to the same information as the fictional detective'.⁸⁴ At the same time, British golden age crime fiction has been discussed for its highly conventional form and its insularity.⁸⁵ Its conservatism is at odds, then, with the

⁸⁰ Maria DiBattista, 'The Lowly Art of Murder: Modernism and the Case of the Free Woman', in *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889- 1939*, ed. by Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 176-93 (p. 176).

⁸¹ DiBattista, 'Introduction', p. 17.

⁸² DiBattista, 'The Lowly Art of Murder', p. 185.

⁸³ Light, *Forever England*, pp. 61-6.

⁸⁴ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 27.

⁸⁵ Those who have interpreted the genre in this way include Stephen Knight and Julian Symons. See Knight, 'The Golden Age' and Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972).

radicalism of modernism, suggesting that the form has a rather more conflicted narrative ideology that has previously been recognised.

Certainly, its violence was often contained in its enclosed domestic settings, and it has been accused of being fixated with the upper-middle classes.⁸⁶ Furthermore, it offered a microcosm of society that could maintain order through self-surveillance. Heather Worthington suggests that the ‘fictional detective and his predecessors and prototypes [...] are disciplinary figures with a disciplinary function in ideological terms’.⁸⁷ This ‘disciplinary’ function was part of a class-based ideology. As Worthington argues: ‘[a] police was created by the state in order to control crime, and crime was seen as a trait of the poor that made problems for the rich. Crime or disorder in the upper tiers of society required a different treatment, in fiction, if not in fact’.⁸⁸ Enter the detective. As an instrument of the law, the detective traditionally functioned as a conservative icon in the restoration of order and stability, situating him in what Susan Rowland describes as the ‘masculine [...] tradition of privileging reason, intelligence, order and rationality’.⁸⁹ British golden age fiction, then, appeared to offer a more sustained fantasy of social order.

Critics have looked to the country-house murder, a popular subcurrent of golden age fiction, as evidence of this. Alison Light has described how ‘country houses evoke ancestry, settled traditions and kinship’.⁹⁰ By bringing murder into this sphere and by disrupting the sense of tradition and order captured within the walls of the country house,

⁸⁶ Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, p. 48.

⁸⁷ Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early-Nineteenth Century Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 4.

⁸⁸ Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 16.

⁹⁰ Light, *Forever England*, p. 80.

this mode of crime fiction gestures towards anxiety over the declining upper classes. Humble argues that the country-house novel arose ‘partly as an elegy to the perceived destruction of the aristocracy’.⁹¹ The country-house murder acts as a rather literal representation of this destruction, and the restoration of order that the mode offers can be read as a fantasy of the bourgeois classes that were beginning to disappear. Humble suggest that the weakening of the Edwardian aristocracy by the 1930s, along with the decay of the landed gentry, was symptomatic of the way in which class distinctions were beginning to break down and class identity was fractured, particularly in regards to the middle classes. Although ‘contemporaries retained a firm attachment to the binary model of a middle-class split into upper and lower sections’, Humble asserts that there was, in fact, ‘a sprawling complexity of middle-class identities’ between the 1920s and the 1950s’.⁹² The conservatism of the country house therefore lies, at least in part, in the way that it foregrounds the class ideologies of maintaining social order.

Stephen Knight has observed that Raymond Williams ‘sees the detective novel as an evolution of the country-house literary tradition’⁹³ and if we go directly to William’s *The Country and The City* we see that in his formulation this is distinctly a ‘middle-class detective novel’.⁹⁴ Thus, this mode of crime fiction invokes a long-standing literary tradition in which the country house reinforces class boundaries and reasserts aristocratic power. The status of the country house in this fiction is one of ‘abstract disposability and indifference of function’ which allows it to act as a cipher for the ‘analysis of human relationships’. The significance of this is two-fold: firstly, it enables the country house to

⁹¹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 62, fn 12.

⁹² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 84-6

⁹³ Knight, ‘The Golden Age’, p. 78.

⁹⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (St Albans: Paladin, 1975), p. 299 (emphasis mine).

stand as a symbol of retreat away from the metropolitan streets that characterised influential crime fiction such as the Sherlock Holmes series, and secondly, the country house can become a site for ‘middle class fantasies about the human nature of the traditional inhabitants’.⁹⁵ What Williams touches on here, but fails to mention explicitly, is how this type of crime fiction can be aligned with the middlebrow in the way in which it simultaneously romanticises the literary traditions it refers to, and tracks the dismantling of them in the modern era. Alison Light implies something similar in her analysis of Agatha Christie in *Forever England*. Light challenges the supposed conservatism of Christie, partly by observing that her fictions did engage with modernity. She argues that even in:

her most narrowly rural settings this is a country life dissevered from long genealogies of aristocratic connection, many of whose village inhabitants are only one-generation dwellers [...]. [F]ar from being the ideal refuge from the city, secure and unchanging, the country might turn out to be no different after all.⁹⁶

Light denies that the settings of Christie’s novels are necessarily insular and backward-looking, and instead identifies a dialogue between the rural and urban spheres. Light’s study, then, offers a way of reading against the conservatism of the whodunit by suggesting that its alignment with tradition may not be as unproblematic as it appears.

It also intimates how British golden age fiction has been closely associated with rural settings. This perception has contributed to the conception of a transatlantic divide in crime fiction of the era. In America, the ‘hard-boiled’ tradition came to dominate the genre. Characterised by its gritty urban settings and typically with an anti-hero for a protagonist, the themes of the hard-boiled were passed down from the American literary

⁹⁵ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 299.

⁹⁶ Light, *Forever England*, p. 93.

tradition of frontier fiction and the so-called ‘muckrakers’. Private investigators like Sam Spade from Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and Phillip Marlowe from Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1933) were masculinised and rebellious figures, who subverted distinctions between criminal and detective by throwing out the rule book.⁹⁷ The cosy, rural domesticity of British detective texts stood in apparent opposition to the more aggressively urban American fictions.⁹⁸ Raymond Chandler famously pointed to this division in ‘The Simple Art of Murder’. He celebrated Hammett’s ability to write for those readers ‘with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life’, while mockingly observing of golden age texts: ‘There may be one somewhere that would really stand up to close scrutiny. It would be fun to read it, even if I did have to go back to page forty-seven and refresh my memory about exactly what time the second gardener potted the prize-winning tea-rose begonia’.⁹⁹ This transatlantic divide had not always been associated with the genre, however. As Ascari reminds us, ‘the links between the various national cultures that contributed to the genesis of the detective fiction’ means that the form ‘freely crosses the borders between Great Britain, the United States, France and – occasionally – Italy’,¹⁰⁰ and so can be connected with modernist conceptions of cosmopolitanism. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Four, the construction of a transatlantic divide in crime fiction of the 1920s to the 1940s has actually obscured the

⁹⁷ These two characters acquired iconic masculine status when depicted by Humphrey Bogart in Hollywood adaptations of the two novels. The Oscar-nominated *The Maltese Falcon*, directed by John Huston, was released in 1941, while the Howard Hawks-directed *The Big Sleep* was released in 1946.

⁹⁸ David Earle argues that hard-boiled pulp stories engaged with ‘urban growth, immigration, governmental and corporate distrust and corruption’; thus, the genre ‘shared dynamics’ with modernism: see David Earle, *Recovering Modernism: Pulp, Paperbacks and the Prejudice of Form* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 111. While Earle’s innovative and convincing study continues to trouble the distinction between high and low forms of culture, it still privileges urban space as the realm of modernist culture.

⁹⁹ Raymond Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1944, pp. 53-9 (pp. 56-8).

¹⁰⁰ Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, p. vx.

way in which British golden age fiction addresses the rural and urban spheres. My re-examination of golden age texts contends that they engage with both the rural and the urban, as part of a wider exploration of clashes between tradition and modernity. These clashes can be understood in relation to debates concerning cultural hierarchy, and my close readings challenge the unproblematic alignment of the rural and the traditional with the middlebrow, and the urban and the modern with modernist culture.

Conclusions

The significance of the brow battles during the interwar period should not be underestimated; they shaped transatlantic literary culture and remained at the forefront of both writers' and critics' consciousness. Nonetheless, it is apparent that demarcations between high, low and middle culture are far from simplistic, and are certainly not static. Fiction is only one aspect of cultural hierarchy: the far-reaching implications of brow boundaries are felt through a range of cultural networks that address readerships, audience and art, as much as texts and authors. Consequently, the vast amount of criticism on these two cultures, particularly modernism, means a synthesis of all of these readings is not feasible. Instead, I have opted to focus on those studies that primarily address literature, given that I am tracking literary representations of the single woman. I have not, however, discriminated between British and American scholarship. It is true, as Nancy Paxton has suggested, that 'an unrecognised nationalism' can 'shape the research practices and critical assumptions of many students and scholars of modernism',¹⁰¹ yet these studies still contribute to our understanding of cultural hierarchy. Matters are

¹⁰¹ Paxton, 'Eclipsed by Modernism', p. 7.

complicated somewhat by my own approach to selecting books for this study; although my focus is on British literature, there are some texts by American authors, and some by authors who are more problematic to categorise. However, the consideration of transatlantic criticism seems appropriate as a means of providing as complete a picture as possible.

My aim is to articulate more clearly the way in which fiction demonstrates the fluidity, malleability and arbitrariness of cultural categories. I do this by sustained analysis of fiction in both modernist and middlebrow contexts. I follow in the footsteps of Faye Hammill and Ann Ardis, who have adopted a more comparative approach to analysis of modernist and middlebrow literary cultures. Hammill has insisted on recognising ‘the forms of stylistic experimentation which middlebrow writers engaged in, and which are often overlooked because they do not correspond to the experimental strategies of high modernism’.¹⁰² Ardis, meanwhile, has looked closely at the fiction of Edwardian middlebrow writer Netta Syrett (1865-1943), drawing on contextual material and close reading of a range of Syrett’s texts to demonstrate her ‘quiet but nonetheless devastating critiques of avant-garde “blasting and bombardiering”’.¹⁰³ In using Syrett’s work, Ardis points to a larger gap in our understanding of literature in the interwar years arguing that the ‘other cultural space’ of the middlebrow was:

inhabited by writers and a reading public with a more sophisticated appreciation of aesthetics – and a more critical view of the modernist avant-garde – than the latter’s contemptuous characterisations of both the Edwardian era and the vast publishing world lying outside the modernist submarket would suggest.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars*, p. 6.

¹⁰³ Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*, p. 175.

¹⁰⁴ Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*, p. 138.

My own study is in part a continuation of Ardis and Hammill's desire to refigure the relationship between modernism and middlebrow to produce a more sophisticated map of the literary culture of the interwar period.

I do this with reference to both aesthetics and subject matter. I remain conscious, however, of the difficulties of using modernism and middlebrow in a dialectical relationship. The significations of the terms, particularly the middlebrow, are multiple, and it is difficult to extricate them from one another. I select texts that have been associated with traits that have in turn been linked to literary modernism and the literary middlebrow, but question the rigidity of these definitions. What distinguishes my work is its concentration on a particular figure in the fictions I examine. The single woman provides a focus for my exploration of transgressive female sexuality and subjectivity in relationship to middlebrow and modernist culture. This allows me to critique the way in which these texts also engage with some of the key dichotomies in modernist and middlebrow debates - the divide between the urban and the rural, or between tradition and modernity, for example – whilst also discrediting the unproblematic alignment of these oppositions with specific cultural hierarchies. Throughout this analysis, I return to the question of another binary distinction which has remained largely uninterrogated in criticism of cultural hierarchy – hetero- and homosexuality – in an effort to challenge the perceived sexual radicalism of works that have been identified as modernist, and texts that can be read in the context of the middlebrow. I do this by underlining the transgressive sexuality apparent across a spectrum of interwar fiction. In the next chapter, therefore, I turn to the single woman and explore the ways in which she is defined by her

indefinability: her contradictions, effacements, ambiguities and, above all, her transgressions.

Chapter Two **The (Single) Woman Question**

The concern over transgressive female sexuality in the interwar years has been well explored territory, both in sociohistorical accounts and analyses of the fiction of this period. Numerous studies exist of the different forms this transgression has appeared in – the lesbian in sapphic modernism, the old maid in Victorian fiction, the New Woman of the fin-de-siècle, to name but a few. The desire to classify female sexuality has obscured the complexity of these figures and the ways in which they overlap and are conflated. In contrast, I use the single woman to interrogate the taxonomy of problematic female sexuality, offering an expanded understanding of what the single woman signifies, and tracing the myriad forms she appears in throughout a range of literary texts. In doing so, I argue that the single woman not only encapsulates cultural unease concerning gender, sexuality and class during the 1920s to the 1940s, but particularly demonstrates anxieties over both hetero- and homosexual desire, and the distinction between them. Furthermore, this study is the first to use the single woman as a means of deconstructing boundaries between middlebrow and modernist literary culture.

Before offering an analysis of literary representations of the single woman, it is first necessary to explore her various guises throughout cultural discourse. This chapter works as a largely synthetic account of how I understand the single woman, but it does draw out the problematics of defining her and establish the concerns that will inform my readings in Chapters Three to Five. Elaine Showalter, in her study of sexuality and the

fin-de-siècle, states that she deals ‘with myths, texts and images rather than issues’;¹ my intention will be to follow both in order to signal the fluidity of categories of single women, and the cultural anxieties these categories often point to. The time frame in which I do this dates back to before the interwar period. Showalter’s analysis of the fin-de-siècle in Britain, America and France begins at 1880, as does Lesley Hall’s account of sex, gender and social change in Britain.² Both works have been invaluable in establishing the cultural contexts against which I read the figure of the single woman. Showalter dates the coining of the term fin-de-siècle back to 1880, while Hall cites the date as a pivotal point in changing sexual attitudes and behaviour. I, too, am interested in the cultural shifts in relation to sex and gender that took place in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, largely because, as Hall herself points out, it reveals the way in which war (and, in this case, the First World War) ‘often brought into prominence and visibility themes already present’.³ In other words, many of the major developments described as happening in the 1920s can be traced back to the changes at the turn of the century.

Many of the themes I cover in this chapter are drawn from Showalter’s and Hall’s very different accounts. Showalter’s study is a comparative discussion of two fin-de-siècle periods – the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The time frame that Hall adopts is more unusual, extending from the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle through the interwar years, and beyond to the Second World War as well. Unarguably, the years 1880-1920 heralded fundamental changes for women, but critical discussions that cover this era tend not to track the years beyond it. Indeed, war appears as a defining factor in

¹ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 18.

² Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2006).

³ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 7.

the periodisation of the first half of the twentieth century; in criticism on women's fiction, the 1930s typically come either as a discrete category, or are combined with the 1920s as the interwar years, while the 1940s are often divided up into the Second World War and the post-war periods, respectively.⁴ Although these studies are valuable in their contribution to understandings of female sexuality in both literature and wider cultural discourse, the continuity and nuances of these understandings across the decades of the 1920s to the 1940s has not always been captured. Instead, historical accounts like Hall's and Selina Todd's *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918-1950* help enhance the cultural framework of the single woman that I have instituted. Furthermore, it enables a more nuanced reading of fiction across the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

Accordingly, I have followed Hall's study by adopting a chronological approach, in order to avoid what Hall sees as the down-playing of 'important connections' and the presentation of 'rather too coherent narratives' that characterise a thematic approach.⁵ Indeed, I hope to illuminate how the same issues regarding transgressive female sexuality were repeatedly played out during the years 1880-1940. Given that I am only analysing fiction that dates from the 1920s through to the 1940s, though, I have opted not to separate the decades preceding these years. Therefore, Section One of this chapter lays the contextual foundations of this study by covering the period 1880 to 1920, while Section Two examines the 1920s to the 1940s. The latter section, however, is further divided by decade, allowing me to track the developments during this time frame more

⁴ Notable examples include: Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991); Maroula Joannou, ed., *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Maroula Joannou, *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows: Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change, 1918-1938* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); and Gill Plain's *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

⁵ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 7.

closely, while simultaneously, and more firmly, establishing how conceptions of the single woman are reworked during this period.

I cover a good deal of ground in this chapter, discussing the aesthetic, social, legal and medicinal discourse of this period in order to provide a clearer and more detailed conceptual framework in which to examine the single woman. Since I am exploring fiction in a mainly British context, there is an emphasis on British developments. However, the geographical scope that Showalter adopts has been useful in providing some context for the more cosmopolitan developments affecting modernist culture. The material I cite has been gleaned from a range of accounts, both sociohistorical and literary. The single woman is defined in terms of sometimes competing, sometimes complementary discourses, and in painting a broader picture of the changing circumstances of women, sexuality and gender signification, I hope to foreground the multiple identities of the single woman in the earlier twentieth century, and their relationship to both transgressive sexuality and cultural hierarchies.

Section One: 1880 – 1920

The latter part of the nineteenth century was a time of rapid technological progress and cultural developments in the sphere of science. Angelique Richardson has argued that the impact of science on industry, the economy and British culture led to the politicisation of science as a mode of social control.⁶ This is evident during the fin-de-siècle with the popularisation of Darwin's groundbreaking treatise, *On the Origin of Species* (1859). While Darwin's theory of evolution was initially met with scepticism, by the time of his

⁶ Angelique Richardson, 'The Life Sciences: "Everybody Nowadays Talks About Evolution"', in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 6-33 (p. 7).

death in 1882 its influence was being felt. William Greenslade has outlined how social issues as diverse as poverty, crime, public health, race and sexual behaviour were attracting concern in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.⁷ Darwin's hypothesis of natural selection, with its emphasis on biological causality and inevitability, meant that problematic individuals held responsible for these issues could be labelled as innately transgressive, and their deviance biologically determined.

As Angelique Richardson has observed, cultural discourse appropriated 'symbols of the ugly ("diseased") and beautiful ("healthy")' during this period, in an effort to 'sustain social orders through biological narratives'.⁸ One of the more influential of these narratives was the belief that evolution was not necessarily progressive, and could potentially lead to the physical and moral degeneration of society. William Greenslade has situated degeneration 'at the root of what was, in part, an enabling strategy by which the conventional and respectable classes could justify and articulate their hostility to the deviant, the diseased and the subversive'.⁹ The 'conventional and respectable classes' Greenslade identifies here are the middle classes, who quickly developed a propensity for reading about such scientific developments. Greenslade argues that the popularisation of theories of degeneration manifested itself in the exchange between the scientific and lay community that took place in the printed press during this period. He refers to the range of scientific articles printed in widely-read journals such as *The Nineteenth Century* and *The Contemporary Review*, the materialisation of *The Contemporary Science Series*, and the evolutionary ideas that were espoused by writers such as Aldous Huxley, Francis

⁷ William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁸ Richardson, 'The Life Sciences', p. 7.

⁹ Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*, p. 2.

Galton, Leslie Stephen, Havelock Ellis, Edward Clodd and H. G. Wells as evidence of this.¹⁰

The impact of Darwinism, and its preoccupation with the biological degenerate, also began to be felt in other discourses. The eugenics movement was concerned with the effects of degeneration on racial health, and thus advocated the control of reproduction for the good of the nation. The term ‘eugenics’ was coined by Sir Francis Galton, and The Eugenics Education Society was founded in 1907. Renamed the Eugenics Society in 1926, it counted G. B. Shaw, H. G. Wells, Maynard Keynes and Neville Chamberlain as members.¹¹ Carolyn Burdett argues that the society adopted a position ‘which drew back from advocating compulsory methods of eugenic intervention, such as enforced sterilisation, stressing instead the importance of fostering a “eugenic conscience” in the community at large’.¹² Rather than a radical organisation, then, the society appeared as a conservative one. In practice, though, it was still ‘a class-based application of evolutionary discourses which aimed to regulate population by altering the balance of class in society’, reiterating the alignment of the working classes with immorality and taint.¹³ Similar class inflections were evident in the application of Darwinian theory in psychiatry. Elaine Showalter has identified 1870 to 1920 as the period of what she terms ‘psychiatric Darwinism’.¹⁴ She argues that this phase of English psychiatry viewed madness as ‘the product of organic defect, poor heredity, and an evil environment’.¹⁵ In

¹⁰ Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*, pp. 26-7.

¹¹ Carolyn Burdett, ‘Introduction’ [Eugenics], in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 165-8.

¹² Burdett, ‘Introduction’, p. 167.

¹³ Richardson, ‘The Life Sciences’, p. 13.

¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1998).

¹⁵ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 18.

effect, the insane were deemed to be lost causes, and isolated in order to protect those of a higher social standing.

Psychiatric Darwinism also began to classify a range of specifically female nervous disorders, arguing that these were caused by female ambition and the entrance of women into higher education especially. Showalter highlights ‘important differences between the phenomena of hysteria, anorexia and neurasthenia’.¹⁶ These categories were not precise. Broadly speaking, the term hysteria, although always associated with women, became especially suggestive of ‘extremes of emotionality’ in this period; meanwhile, neurasthenia, although previously linked to both sexes, changed into ‘a model of ladylike deportment and hyperfemininity’, and affected women who were ‘spiritualised, incorporeal and pure’.¹⁷ Although these terms were not new, and the ‘diagnostic categories were far from precise’, Showalter suggests the disorders were seen to reach epidemic proportions until all three became ‘labels for the same unhappy woman, three faces of Eve’.¹⁸ The Darwinian emphasis on the degenerative causes of these nervous disorders, and its insistence on linking this to female intellectual efforts, became a method of relegating women of all classes as inferior to men, while emphasising their vulnerability to mental instability.

The way in which degeneration was appropriated in the art world stands in stark contrast. Emerging cultural phenomena were forging ideologies that reworked theories of degeneration to their advantage. This can be seen particularly in the range of avant-garde movements that began to appear at this time. Aestheticism rejected the discourse of

¹⁶ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 144.

¹⁷ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, pp. 134-45.

¹⁸ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 144.

morality implicit in scientific tracts of the time, and focused instead on ‘art for art’s sake’; that is, a self-sufficient expression of beauty that did not articulate any moral value or usefulness.¹⁹ This philosophy was refigured by decadence. Elaine Showalter has highlighted the difficulties in attempting to define decadence, since it functioned as ‘a pejorative label applied by the bourgeoisie to everything that seemed unnatural, artificial, and perverse, from Art Nouveau to homosexuality, a sickness with symptoms associated with cultural degeneration and decay’.²⁰ Generally, decadence rejected ideas of biological determinism and naturalness by aestheticising degeneration. As Showalter implies, the decadents themselves were a symptom of degeneration to the middle classes, but decadence celebrated its transgressiveness in the face of bourgeois anxiety.

Attacking the discourse which the bourgeoisie had appropriated in order to maintain social control was not the only aim of decadence; it also confronted the patriarchal system itself. As Elaine Showalter points out, the avant garde ‘challenged its class structures and roles, its systems of inheritance and primogeniture, its compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, and its cultural authority’.²¹ Decadent ideologies were far from utopian though; for all its antipatriarchalism, the movement was also marked by occasional misogyny.²² Nonetheless, the intrinsic association of the movement with homosexuality is one of the ways in which its challenge to compulsory heterosexuality is legible. Showalter argues that homosexual culture emerged ‘in the “decadent” art and

¹⁹ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th edn (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), pp. 2-3.

²⁰ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 169.

²¹ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 11.

²² Baudelaire is an often-used example of decadence’s violent depictions of the female body.

literature' of the fin-de-siècle.²³ The emergence of a culture (as opposed to a series of individual acts) may be in part due to changing legal definitions of homosexuality. While sodomy laws had been in place in Britain since the sixteenth century, Section 11 of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act criminalised any acts of male 'gross indecency', which in effect enabled the prosecution of any male homosexual behaviour. It was under this new law that Oscar Wilde was tried for homosexuality. In Wilde, both decadence and homosexuality would find infamy. Showalter positions Wilde as 'one of the leading theorists of decadence' and describes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as 'the English Bible of decadence, as well as a kind of bible for male homosexuals, inspiring a particular cult of behaviour, dress and speech'.²⁴ The impact of Wilde's trial and subsequent incarceration should not be underestimated. As Hall has surmised, the cultural construction of Wilde 'collapsed a number of transgressive male possibilities (effeminacy, decadence, aestheticism, bohemianism, dandyism, self-indulgence and excess) in practice pertaining equally to heterosexual men, into one monstrous cautionary figure'.²⁵ Wilde became an instrument in the continued pathologisation of homosexuality in the secular state.

He also became a figure of anxiety for those concerned with the increasing visibility of male homosexuality at this time. According to Showalter, Wilde's trial 'created a moral panic,' partly because of concern about the perception of a degenerating society, but also partly because of the fear that Wilde's trial would somehow encourage

²³ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 15.

²⁴ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 176.

²⁵ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 54.

or publicise male homosexuality.²⁶ This ‘moral panic’ certainly appears plausible given the raft of literary censorship that followed, but Showalter neglects to highlight how the relationship between homosexuality and morality was affected by sexology. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan have described sexology as ‘the study and classification of sexual behaviours, identities and relations’.²⁷ The key figures of the movement included the British homosexual socialist Edward Carpenter, as well as the physician Havelock Ellis and Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Although sexology dealt with a wide range of sexual taxonomies, contemporary criticism on gender and sexuality has often focussed on how sexological discourse constructed notions of normative and non-normative sexuality, particularly in its theories of homosexuality. Inversion, sometimes referred to as the ‘third sex’, referred to the belief that homosexuality arose when a masculine identity was trapped inside a female body, and vice versa.²⁸ Its insistence on the innateness of sexual classifications meant it too could become part of biological narratives concerned with sexual morality.

Although inversion has been portrayed as the dominant explanation for homosexuality at this time, Showalter identifies another: namely, ‘the male-identified man and the woman-identified woman’ who both ‘expressed heightened forms of masculinity and femininity, and were the most purely “manly” or “womanly” representatives of their sex’.²⁹ There were Darwinian implications in this model; while the blurring of gender boundaries indicated degeneration, a clear distinction between

²⁶ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 171.

²⁷ Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, ‘General Introduction’, in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 1-7 (p. 1).

²⁸ See especially Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), Ellis’s *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928) and Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

²⁹ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, pp. 172-4.

them, as in the figures described, could point to an upward evolutionary trajectory. These two opposing ideals are indicative of wider differences in sexological theory. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan have argued that an over-reliance on secondary sources, instead of careful consideration of primary texts, have ‘cloud[ed] our understandings of what early sexologists actually said or did’.³⁰ Indeed, sexology was far from a coherent, monolithic ideology. For example, as Alison Oram and Annemarie Turnbull have highlighted, there were still some sexologists who viewed homosexuality as acquired, rather than innate.³¹ But there was also disagreement in other sexological gender theories. As Showalter has described, Darwinian notions (and, implicitly, sexological ones) of sexual difference reiterated Victorian ideals of the sexes, and emphasised the inferiority of women to men.³² Yet, as Rita Felski asserts, ‘figures such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter held relatively progressive views on women’s rights and [...] sexologists were often marginal figures, rather than representatives of an all-powerful medical establishment’.³³ Lesley Hall, meanwhile, has refuted the argument that women who aligned themselves with sexology somehow compromised their feminist claims and instead suggests the emphasis on female passivity to male sexologist theory is an ‘immense condescension’.³⁴ Nevertheless, sexology has been constructed as a regulatory practice, which established models of sexual normativity for both men and women.

³⁰ Bland and Doan, ‘General Introduction’, p. 1.

³¹ See Alison Oram and Annemarie Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex Between Women in Britain from 1780-1970* (London: Routledge 2001), p. 94.

³² Showalter, *The Female Malady*, pp. 121-24.

³³ Rita Felski, ‘Introduction’, in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desire*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 1-8 (p. 6).

³⁴ Lesley Hall, ‘Feminist Reconfigurations of Heterosexuality in the 1920s’, in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desire*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 135-49 (p. 136).

The construction of normativity and sexual deviance at this time is also apparent in the emergence of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis seemingly challenged the biological determinism of sexology, and instead argued that sexual preferences and practices arose out of psychic drives. The term was coined back in 1901, and was pioneered by Sigmund Freud, in his work on nervous disorders. Neither of these conflicting accounts of sexual development were accepted into popular culture until well into the interwar years.³⁵ This was largely due to the restrictions placed upon sexological and psychoanalytic texts, which were often available to qualified medical professionals and the intellectual strata of British society. The first volume of Ellis' *Studies in the Psychologies of Sex* was actually banned on grounds of obscenity, and Hall explains that when it was sanctioned, it was available only in specialist libraries.³⁶ Similarly, Chris Waters notes how those 'who attempted to popularise Freud were [initially] cautious in discussing his work on sexuality'.³⁷ Thus, the notion that sexology and psychoanalysis were an effective means of medicalising Darwinian ideology is problematic.

The new scientific narratives of sex and sexuality can be contextualised by the concepts of modernity and metropolitanism that were emerging during this period. Alice Gambrell argues that 'several influential strains of cultural critique, including psychoanalysis alongside anthropology and surrealism' operating throughout the earlier twentieth century were 'metropolitan formations'.³⁸ These kinds of cultural critiques may be seen as a reaction to growing unease over modernity, and particularly the modern city

³⁵ These developments are outlined in the next section.

³⁶ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 76.

³⁷ Chris Waters, 'Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud and the State: Discourses of Homosexual Identity in Interwar Britain', in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desire*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 165-79 (p. 169).

³⁸ Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 12.

as a site in which anxieties concerning biological determinism and social ills were played out. Greenslade has written of the urban crisis of the 1880s, in which city areas were overcrowded, and problems of poverty and lack of sanitation were becoming increasingly visible. These anxieties appeared in cultural discourses of the period. Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895) became a key text in secular rhetoric about the moral corruption of society; a bestseller, it lambasted the immorality of a range of contemporary artistic and cultural movements. Greenslade emphasises how Nordau's text invokes the modern city as a site for degeneration, representing it as a 'territory of immanent breakdown, where the contours of that territory and the map which described it were conflated'.³⁹

Degeneration meant that these urban areas were reconceived as moral wastelands, where the boundaries between poor and rich, righteous and corrupt, were becoming porous.

Showalter has stated that 'in periods of cultural insecurity [...] the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality becomes especially intense'.⁴⁰ Given the changing status of the modern city, and the ever-shifting borders between the spheres Showalter refers to, the metropolitan held particular resonances for the debates concerning women at this time. Biological narratives had fostered increasing social unease over the changing role of men and women, particularly in terms of the public and private spaces they were assigned. It has been well documented that Victorian ideology revolved around the containment of women within the private, domestic sphere. Deborah Parsons examines the relationship between women and the modern city, and traces the urban woman's navigation of the public/private dichotomy. Parsons details how urban areas had traditionally been the

³⁹ Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 4.

space of the male flâneur, while the urban woman was automatically read as the streetwalking prostitute.⁴¹

Parsons tracks the reclamation of legitimate urban spaces by women, focusing on a number of female archetypes, including the shop girl and the New Woman. The shop girl was a distinctly urban phenomenon; the popularity of the department store meant that the urban woman could now be a consumer, a role that relied on both her ‘voyeurism and fetishism’.⁴² The New Woman, meanwhile, was a middle-class conception, appearing at the close of the nineteenth century as a sexually and financially independent woman who ‘criticized society’s insistence on marriage as woman’s only option of a fulfilling life’.⁴³ Unlike the working-class shop girl, the New Woman became a contested figure in terms of gender signification. In discussing the representation of the New Woman in the fiction of the time, Parsons concludes that the ‘unmarried, emancipated woman was [...] judged in sexual terms as threatening to masculinity; either as sexually free and voracious or asexual and androgynous’.⁴⁴ Showalter is seemingly in agreement with Parsons. On the one hand, she argues that the New Woman championed female desire; a cause that led to her association with anarchy, degeneration and neurasthenia.⁴⁵ On the other hand, she describes a faction of New Women who appropriated Darwinian theories themselves, and ‘envisioned themselves as chaste yet maternal heralds of a higher race’; consequently, ‘female sexuality is purged, projected, or transcended through activism’.⁴⁶ The New Woman, then, becomes defined by her relationship to female sexuality, either by virtue of

⁴¹ Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴² Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 48.

⁴³ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 38.

⁴⁴ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 84.

⁴⁵ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, pp. 38-46.

⁴⁶ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 45.

her abstinence or her overindulgence. Either way, the New Woman is positioned according to her marital status, and identified by a discourse of deviance. Her contradictions indicate the difficulty in defining the single woman in this period. For example, the so-called odd woman was constructed as an old maid or spinster left on the shelf.⁴⁷ This figure suggests asexuality, but she was still viewed with suspicion; as Laura Doan has argued, sexological discourse had deemed female celibacy abnormal and deviant.⁴⁸ For Doan, however, the spinster is a ‘highly particularised entity’, and a distinctly middle-class one at that.⁴⁹ While the New Woman can be read as either sexual or asexual in Showalter’s eyes, the spinster denotes singleness for Doan, as she surmises: ‘[n]ot all spinsters were New Women, but all New Women were spinsters’.⁵⁰ Her explanation raises questions over how the odd woman has been defined in relation to the New Woman. The varying categories start to become dependent on one another for meaning, and the overlaps make it increasingly difficult to extricate coherent identities out of the pile of signifiers.

The ambiguity surrounding the sexual status of single women was probably due to nervousness over the regulation of female sexuality. The Victorian construction of the virgin/whore dichotomy has been well established, and we can see how the insistence on this model emerges in the debates concerning venereal disease. Lesley Hall has written of the ‘overwhelming problem’ of venereal disease in the Armed Forces which led to the

⁴⁷ Named after the George Gissing novel, *The Odd Women* (1893).

⁴⁸ Laura Doan, ‘Introduction’, in *Old Maids To Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, ed. by Laura Doan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 1-16 (p. 4).

⁴⁹ Doan, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Doan, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

setting up of a Royal Commission in 1860 to investigate it.⁵¹ During this period, treatments available for VD were not very effective and the health of the army was perceived to be at stake because of this. Thus, as Hall details, the Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 sought to treat the problem at its perceived source: prostitutes. Under these pieces of legislation, prostitutes could be subjected to ‘compulsory physical examination if suspected of disease, and incarcerated in Lock Hospitals until “cured” if they were found to be diseased’.⁵² The difficulty, of course, was that any woman found alone in a public space could be a potential prostitute. These acts were indicative of the way in which women, and particularly working-class, single women, were castigated as potential carriers of venereal disease, and their sexual activity was associated with uncleanliness. Yet there was noticeable discontent over these pieces of legislation and following pressure from the social purity movement⁵³ and feminist reformers, the acts were repealed in 1886.

Further progress was also beginning to be made in marriage legislation too. In the mid-nineteenth century, marriage legislation was still rife with inequalities. The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, for example meant that while adultery was basis enough for a man to sue for divorce, a woman needed ‘an additional matrimonial offence’ to do the same. Hall observes that ‘the traditional reason given [for this inequality] was a fear of a wife introducing a spurious child into the family, whereas the man’s promiscuity would have no such deleterious effects’.⁵⁴ Marriage appeared as a system with which to keep

⁵¹ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 22.

⁵² Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, pp. 22-3.

⁵³ This was a movement that was formed in the latter half of the nineteenth century in an effort to combat perceived sexual immorality. It was fundamental in the campaign against prostitution.

⁵⁴ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, pp. 10-11.

women firmly confined within the domestic sphere. However, Hall has argued that Victorian rhetoric concerning the private and public spheres has obscured the progress made by women during this period:

The idea of the Victorian (middle-class) woman as enmeshed in the private sphere, reclining on a sofa in a state of real or hysterical ill-health, fails to reflect the ways in which women were advancing their rights to be heard in, and to have influence in, the public world. The very doctrine of 'separate spheres' provided Victorian female reformers with a rhetorical tool in arguing that the values of 'woman's sphere' ought to be brought to bear on the world outside the home.⁵⁵

Hall's argument is certainly persuasive, and she cites numerous examples of the breakthroughs made by reformers during this time. New legislation pertaining to marriage started to recompense women, and moved them away from a position where their financial and legal identities were subsumed into those of their husbands. Furthermore, Hall challenges the construction of the fallen woman as morally unredeemable within the social system, arguing that in 'some communities bearing a child might not even adversely affect chances of marriage, and society as a whole regarded the unfortunate once-fallen as a different case to the habitually promiscuous'.⁵⁶ It becomes clear, then, that in between the layers of moral panic, anxiety concerning the status of both married and single women was prevalent.

This anxiety was also slowly impacting on the conception of women as wives and mothers. The domestic ideology imposed on women insisted that reproduction was an essential part of their womanly duty. However, developments at the beginning of the nineteenth century began to threaten female subservience to marriage. The suffrage movement, that had been striving to gain the vote for women since the 1860s, was

⁵⁵ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 16.

gathering momentum and managed to achieve partial enfranchisement for women over thirty by 1918.⁵⁷ Opportunities for women to move out from the domestic sphere into paid work were also becoming more commonly available, even if these opportunities were restricted in class terms. Anthea Trodd observes how the 1890s saw ‘a steep rise in white-collar jobs for women, as typists, clerks, receptionists, [and] elementary school teachers’, although marriage bars in these jobs were common.⁵⁸ Domestic service still monopolised the job market, employing forty-two per cent of the female workforce in 1901.⁵⁹ But it was undoubtedly the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 that revolutionised working for women. Initially, war caused mass unemployment for the working classes; the more financially comfortable middle-classes worked voluntarily, often simply knitting or sewing for the troops. By 1915, however, the number of vacancies left by men who had gone to fight was so high that women began to be substituted into non-industrial sectors, and then into munitions factories.⁶⁰ Following the introduction of male conscription in 1916, they progressed into privately-owned, non-munitions industries.⁶¹ In 1917, the Women’s Land Army was set up, and the number of women working in agriculture rose from around 80,000 before the war to 113,000 by the end of it.⁶²

While the economy and infrastructure of wartime Britain depended on women, this drew them away from the domestic sphere. At the same time, British rhetoric was

⁵⁷ The struggle for suffrage was not always a unified front; for further details of campaign factions see Maroula Joannou and June Purvis, eds, *The Woman’s Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

⁵⁸ Anthea Trodd, *Women’s Writing in English: Britain, 1900-1945* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 18.

⁵⁹ Trodd, *Women’s Writing in English*, p. 19.

⁶⁰ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 132.

⁶¹ See Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1989) for a fuller account.

⁶² Braybon, *Women Workers*, p. 134.

emphasising the importance of motherhood. Part of this reason was practical: Anthea Trodd suggests that there was ‘an increasing panic about the supposed degeneracy of the British race, which was intensified by the discovery that fewer than half of the men who volunteered for the Boer War between 1899 and 1902 met the (low) requisite physical qualifications’.⁶³ These fears crystallised around working mothers, and the effects of their lifestyle on their children, and Braybon outlines ‘new schemes reducing the rate of mortality and morbidity amongst children, including the provision of baby clinics and school meals’ that were set up by the state.⁶⁴ But these initiatives can also be interpreted as an attempt to maintain class and gender boundaries at a time of social and political upheaval. Although Marie Stopes has achieved fame as the pioneer of the birth control movement, Lucy Burke argues that in books such as *Married Love* (1918) and *Radiant Motherhood* (1920), she emphasises ‘beauty’ and ‘cleanliness’, while associating the working-class woman with ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’, thus delineating ‘middle-class cultural practices’ according to ‘their difference and distinction from the perceived sexual habits and behaviour of the working classes’.⁶⁵ The success of *Married Love* suggests that the reading public were buying into Stopes’ ideas, since it sold over 500,000 copies by 1925.⁶⁶ Billie Melman suggests that it was during this period that there was a ‘consolidation of the nuclear unit’,⁶⁷ yet women’s role within this unit seems shifting and conflicted, and was differentiated according to class, as we shall see in the rest of the

⁶³ Trodd, *Women’s Writing in English*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Braybon, *Women Workers*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Lucy Burke, ‘In Pursuit of an Erogamic Life: Marie Stopes and the Culture of *Married Love*’, in *Women’s Experience of Modernity, 1875-1945*, ed. by Ann Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 254-69 (pp. 257-9).

⁶⁶ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 108.

⁶⁷ Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 5.

chapter. The end of the war in 1918 only heralded further destabilisation of gender and class signification.

Section Two: 1920 – 1950

Part I: 1920s

In her study of twentieth-century women's historical fiction, Diana Wallace argues that the post-First World War environment opened up new routes of emancipation for women.⁶⁸ Much of the legislation that led to this had been put in place in the preceding decades, as we have seen. But by the 1920s, the effects of this legislation were beginning to have an impact across the classes. Working-class women had taken up the industrial jobs left vacant by the men who went off to war. Improved access to universities meant that middle-class women were becoming increasingly educated. One of the most tangible measures of the advances made was the full enfranchisement of women over twenty one in 1928. The gains made by the suffragettes, and the legal recognition of women as politically independent subjects, signalled their ability to take up legitimate, socially-sanctioned roles in maintaining the stability of the country at a time of turmoil.

While this is true, the account perhaps glosses over the continuing complexity of the role of women in the public and private spheres from the 1920s to the 1940s. The end of the First World War marked a time of uncertainty for women. The male workforce returned, and women's unemployment rose – 750,000 women had left their war work by 1919.⁶⁹ Billie Melman observes that by 1921, the number of employed women had fallen

⁶⁸ Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp. 25-27.

⁶⁹ Braybon, *Women Workers*, p. 147.

to just over five million (it had been up at nearly eight million in 1918).⁷⁰ Still, the transformation in working culture for women was permanent, if not exactly static. Selina Todd points out that women ‘under the age of twenty five constituted nearly fifty per cent of the female workforce in interwar England’.⁷¹ Instead of focusing on the loss of women’s jobs to returning soldiers, Todd instead emphasises how women workers were still in demand. There was a marked increase in retail work on account of department store expansions, for example, and continued demand for domestic service, which was still the largest employer of women workers in the interwar years (even if household size had shrunk).⁷² In 1928, the Ministry of Labour introduced a labour transference scheme to redistribute workers across regions, and Todd argues that young, single women were ‘central to this strategy’.⁷³

In fact, Todd’s study implies that the single woman was central to the transformation of the female workforce itself during this period. In her analysis, she argues against the prominence given to studies of married women and work, and instead focuses on the young woman. She defines her as between school-leaving age (which was fourteen from 1921 to 1947) and the ‘average age of first marriage for women’ which ‘never fell below twenty-four between 1918 and 1950’.⁷⁴ Although she does not define the young women she discusses as exclusively single, she remains preoccupied with young women workers as daughters within families (rather than wives) and so implies that the developments she tracks apply largely to single women. Furthermore, she argues

⁷⁰ Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, p. 6.

⁷¹ Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and the Family in England, 1918-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 19.

⁷² Todd, *Young Women, Work and the Family*, pp. 33-40.

⁷³ Todd, *Young Women, Work and the Family*, p. 131.

⁷⁴ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, p. 1.

that ‘closer scrutiny of their [young women’s] household roles and relationships with parents and siblings indicates that economic responsibility, as well as limited social and financial independence, distinguished young wage earners from schoolchildren and adults’.⁷⁵ Therein lies the dichotomy of the single woman and work: while families had a vested interest in maximising their daughters’ contributions to the family income, their working status contributed to social tensions.

Apprehension over the single woman had certainly been in evidence before the 1920s; yet against the backdrop of emancipation that Wallace outlines, it was in this decade that she was arguably perceived by critics to be at her most transgressive. Todd’s study illuminates how women’s changing roles in the workforce coincided with concern over their increasing distance from the domestic sphere. This was exacerbated by the effects of war. The heavy casualties of battle meant that for the first time in years, the number of women in Britain was higher than the number of men. The perception that women were struggling to find husbands following this loss was no doubt fuelled by the 1921 census which counted one and three quarters of a million of what Virginia Nicholson, among others, have labelled ‘surplus women’.⁷⁶ In her study of single women in the aftermath of the war, Nicholson addresses what she perceives as the ‘enforced spinsterhood’ faced by a generation of women who ‘unquestioningly believed marriage to be their birthright, only to have it snatched from them by four of the bloodiest years in human history’.⁷⁷ A social account relying on anecdotes and personal histories, rather than empirical evidence, Nicholson’s book, perhaps unwittingly, reiterates the fear-

⁷⁵ Todd, *Young Women, Work and the Family*, p. 55.

⁷⁶ Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men After the First World War* (London: Viking, 2007).

⁷⁷ Nicholson, *Singled Out*, pp. x-xii

mongering of the 1920s. In her effort to cover the ‘individual tales of courage’ she heard while researching her study, Nicholson may try to reverse the image of the surplus woman as the Victorian old maid, but it remains in some ways a rather singular view of the 1920s.⁷⁸ Undoubtedly, there were many women who lost their husbands or potential fiancés in battle. However, although Nicholson acknowledges that some women may have simply chosen to be single, and refers to a debate questioning the perceived shortage of men, she does not give due weight to either of these issues. Lesley Hall, however, has pointed out that marriage did in fact continue to be popular during the 1920s, and observes that the rate of marriage, generally speaking, decreased only marginally (and had, in fact, risen among the younger generation).⁷⁹ Katherine Holden refutes the notion of the surplus woman, observing that there had been a substantial number of single women through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and that celibacy rates did not increase at this time.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, the perception of a declining marriage rate continued. This coincided with concern over the birth rate, which actually was falling. Contraception had been on the agenda of feminist reform for some years, especially in the interests of guarding against venereal disease, and the question of how best to do this was ongoing; the 1923 Trevethin Committee was appointed to investigate venereal disease, and appeared concerned with the debates about ‘prevention versus provision of early treatment’.⁸¹ Paradoxically, given anxiety over single women at this time, the 1920s witnessed a drive

⁷⁸ Nicholson, *Singled Out*, p. xii

⁷⁹ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, pp. 106-7.

⁸⁰ Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 11.

⁸¹ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 103.

towards promoting birth control for married women. One of the figureheads of the movement had been Marie Stopes, who founded the Society for Constructive Birth Control in 1921, and set up the first provisional birth control clinics not long after. Hall qualifies the gains made by Stopes and other reformers such as Stella Browne, suggesting that '[t]he new issue which characterised the twenties was the rise in discussability of birth control' and that 'the extent of the actual employment of artificial birth control, rather than abstention or withdrawal, remains a matter of considerable debate among demographers and social historians'.⁸² It may well be that even the threat of women being in control of their reproductive destinies during a time of a perceived marriage crisis was enough to heighten concern over the single woman.

Those who did reject both motherhood and marriage were also offered alternative identities of singlehood. Despite the shortcomings of her approach, Nicholson does outline the ways in which single women were beginning to forge their own, more exciting identities. Alongside the surplus women, more sexualised and more glamorous incarnations of the middle-class single woman were emerging. One of the most popular cultural images of this was the flapper. A product of the Jazz Age, the flapper would achieve her iconic image at the movies, through silent film stars such as Louise Brooks and Clara Bow. Betsy Israel argues that flappers were 'the first singles to be viewed as a peer group *and* as a peer demographic' and, although the flapper was portrayed mostly as a vixen, underneath the image she was in fact a 'good girl'.⁸³ The glamour associated with the flapper, however, appears primarily an American phenomenon. Billie Melman

⁸² Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, pp. 105-6.

⁸³ Betsy Israel, *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Single Women in the Twentieth Century* (London: Aurum Press, 2003), pp. 128-33.

has tracked how the figure was much more problematic on the other side of the Atlantic, contesting her supposed glamour by tracking multiple, pejorative significations of the word 'flapper', and how these significations aligned the modern woman with a 'precocious sexuality'.⁸⁴ Flapper became a synonym for the modern enfranchised woman: hence, the 1929 hung parliament that resulted in Britain was blamed on the so-called 'flapper vote' in the popular press.

The flapper was an iconic, and therefore easily identifiable, incarnation of the single woman. But the plethora of different categories of single women, and their shifting identities during the interwar period, meant that it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish them from one another. A large part of this problem was due to the ambiguity about what signalled a woman as deviant. Caroline Howlett observes that even militant suffragettes often kept to a feminine dress code during their protests; she ponders the visual impact of femininely-clad women smashing windows before surmising that:

Feminine dress could no longer be assumed to denote feminine subservience in its wearer, but on the other hand it could not, of course, be assumed to denote militancy: in other words, by 1913, femininity had lost its stability as a signifier in the heterosexual economy.⁸⁵

Although Howlett attributes the shift in destabilised gender signifiers to the previous decade, the effects of this can be felt in the 1920s, in the increasing destabilisation of the category of the single woman. Implicit in Howlett's essay is the question of how transgressive sexuality is detectable. In the 1920s, problematic female sexuality was taking on a new dimension, as expressed through cultural anxiety concerning lesbian

⁸⁴ Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, p. 28.

⁸⁵ Caroline Howlett, 'Femininity Slashed: Suffragette Militancy, Modernism and Gender', in *Modernist Sexualities*, ed. by Hugh Stevens and Caroline Howlett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 72-91 (p. 77).

desire. Laura Doan cites 1920-1 as the period in which discussion of lesbianism began to enter legal discourse in England, following the 1920 Joint Select Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Bill.⁸⁶ Using parliamentary records, Doan mounts a persuasive argument that the criminalisation of lesbian relations actually came about incidentally. She suggests that the real intention may have been only to extend Clause Seven of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill (the section referring to age of consent) to include relations between young girls and older women in an effort to further protect children against sex trafficking; the inability of the committee to discuss the problem in a transparent and specific way led to a conflation of the issue with lesbianism, which culminated in ‘the committee’s proposal to extend the Labouchère Amendment to women, thereby criminalising lesbianism’.⁸⁷ Although the criminalisation of lesbianism has traditionally been read as measure of how visible the problem was becoming by the 1920s, Doan’s reading allows a reimagining of the dynamics of problematic female sexuality as considerably more ambiguous.

This echoes an earlier work by Doan, in which she questions the similarities and differences between the spinster and the lesbian. For Doan, both spinster and lesbian ‘reject the primacy of heterosexual marriage and choose a life-style that, in threatening patriarchy, signals some measure of social deviancy’.⁸⁸ Yet she also points to an obvious distinction; whereas the lesbian positions herself in relation to women (emotionally and/or erotically), the spinster exercises a ‘deliberate, positive choice not to define herself

⁸⁶ Laura Doan, “‘Acts of Female Indecency’: Sexology’s Intervention in Legislating Lesbianism’, in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desire*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 199-213 (p. 200).

⁸⁷ Doan, “‘Acts of Female Indecency’”, p. 205. This was the section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act that criminalised sexual relations between men in 1885.

⁸⁸ Laura Doan, ‘Introduction’, p. 4.

in relation to a significant other'.⁸⁹ This is problematic when considering Lillian Faderman's account of lesbianism in America. Faderman argues that passionate friendships between women and so-called 'Boston marriages' began to arouse suspicions at the turn of the nineteenth century and were progressively sexualised.⁹⁰ Doan's incorporation of emotional attachments to women in her definition of lesbianism, therefore, potentially includes a category of single women that may not always have necessarily been associated with lesbian desire. However, Doan's argument raises the crucial question of how differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality are made visible, if we accept Howlett's argument that femininity is no longer a stable signifier. The invisibility of lesbianism could certainly explain why a figure such as Lady Cicely Hamilton could simultaneously be an emblem of stoic spinsterhood for Nicholson, and an indicator of the invisible femme in Howlett's reading of her relationship between her and the lesbian Chris St John.⁹¹

So why is it, then, that critics have argued that lesbianism became increasingly visible during the 1920s? Part of the reason for this argument no doubt stems from the popularisation of the 'mannish woman', who would be most famously represented by Radclyffe Hall. Hall was a well-known follower of Ellis's model of sexual inversion, and the mannish fashion in which she dresses both herself and her lesbian heroine Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) serves as a means of identifying them both as

⁸⁹ Doan, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁹⁰ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991). The term 'Boston marriage' is thought to derive from Henry James *The Bostonians* (1886) and the relationship between the New Women in the text.

⁹¹ Nicholson makes no reference to Hamilton's lesbianism, instead describing her as an 'Aunt Jane' (named after the belligerent old maid from a poem by Hilaire Belloc): see Nicholson, *Singled Out*, p. 41. Howlett, meanwhile, uses an image of Hamilton and St John dressed as George Eliot and George Sand at a fancy dress ball to read both Hamilton and the suffragette's dress as a 'woman-orientated feminine performance': see Howlett, 'Femininity Slashed', p. 76.

lesbian. Martha Vicinus acknowledges the cultural prevalence of this figure, arguing that by the 1920s, ‘the theories of the medical sexologists had permeated large sections of society, so that a specific deviant gender role – the mannish woman – came to represent a deviant sexual role’.⁹² Yet a certain set of class complexities are at work here. The large sections of society that Vicinus refers to are middle class – but the mannish clothing they view with distrust was appropriated by a coterie of wealthy, upper-class women, who drew on theatrics as a way of constructing their own lesbian identity. Even so, the signalling of their lesbianism remains ambiguous. On one hand, as Vicinus argues, their garb signalled the performance of their homosexuality. On the other, they developed codes and secret fashion signifiers as a means of simultaneously concealing or camouflaging their sexual orientation – thus, they are able to “pass” as either homo – or heterosexual’.⁹³

Implicit in Vicinus’ essay is the reading of the mannish lesbian as a subcategory of the anti-feminine New Woman. David Trotter is more explicit about his reading of Hall’s *The Unlit Lamp* (1924).⁹⁴ For Trotter, the lesbian becomes a ‘Newer Woman’ that simply supersedes the previous mode of New Woman. This is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it obscures the middle-class status of the New Woman by aligning her with the image of the upper-class mannish lesbian. Secondly, equating her with the urban New Woman fails to take account of an alternative model of lesbianism, which is a rather more cosmopolitan, rather than just metropolitan, creation. The coterie of women that

⁹² Martha Vicinus, ‘Fin-de-Siècle Theatrics: Male Impersonation and Lesbian Desire’, in *Borderlines: Gender and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930*, ed. by Billie Melman (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 163-92 (p. 165).

⁹³ Vicinus, ‘Fin-de-Siècle Theatrics’, p. 165.

⁹⁴ David Trotter, ‘Lesbians Before Lesbianism: Sexual Identity in Early Twentieth-Century British Fiction’, in *Borderlines: Gender and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930*, ed. by Billie Melman (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 193-211.

Vicinus refers to includes a community of expatriate artists based in Paris, who used Sapphic ideology to establish their own lesbian subculture. Barney's circle has been the focus of a school of critics concerned with lesbian modernists in the early years of the twentieth century. In their collection of essays, Laura Doan and Jane Garrity 'explore the powerful culture of the Sapphic in the cultural imaginary as well as in cultural production to demonstrate evidence of the profound shifts – in terms of visibility, intelligibility, and accessibility of sapphism in modern Anglophone cultures between the two world wars'.⁹⁵ For Doan and Garrity, the concept of sapphism can be appropriated to symbolise the fluidity of lesbianism, and they position it within an emergent culture of modernity. But since, as by their own admittance, their focus remains on the history of white, wealthy lesbian culture, they fail to make legible the various significations of lesbianism for middle- and working-class women, and ethnic minorities. As they acknowledge, the lack of source material is a hindrance; but it also illuminates the ways in which lesbian history has been incomplete.⁹⁶

Furthermore, the supposed deviance of lesbianism in the 1920s is only one of the ways in which normative behaviour was coming under scrutiny in the post-war years. For example, models of masculinity, as well as femininity, were also shifting at this time. Elaine Showalter has argued that the First World War – and, specifically, the prevalence of shell shock among returning soldiers – 'initiated the era of psychiatric modernism'.⁹⁷ Showalter interprets shell shock as a male form of hysteria, which she claims was a

⁹⁵ Laura Doan and Jane Garrity 'Introduction', in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-13 (p. 1).

⁹⁶ Doan and Garrity, 'Introduction', p. 8.

⁹⁷ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 164.

reaction to the ‘heightened code of masculinity that dominated in wartime’.⁹⁸ The changes effected by shell shock meant that Darwinian psychiatry was replaced by a new mode of psychotherapy that emphasised the emotional causes of nervous disorders, rather than the physical ones.⁹⁹ This coincided with a similar branch of thought which was increasingly dominating psychiatry: psychoanalysis. Despite its inception decades before, psychoanalysis was not yet at the height of its popularity; nonetheless, it was on the ascendant, largely due its adoption by interwar criminologists. Showalter credits one of Freud’s earlier works, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), with ‘lay[ing] the groundwork for a culturally aware therapy that took women’s words and women’s lives seriously, that respected the aspirations of New Women, and that allowed women a say in the management of hysterical symptoms’.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, it appears that in its early days, women were hopeful that psychoanalysis would offer an alternative to Darwinian modes of thought that denigrated women. However, as Showalter states, these hopes were dashed by the interwar years and general feminist opinion concurred that psychoanalysis had evolved into a scientific discourse that also ‘devalued women’.¹⁰¹

Part II: 1930s

Chris Waters outlines the impact of psychoanalysis on criminology, which used its theories in ‘their own campaigns for penal reform’.¹⁰² However, Waters contends that

⁹⁸ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 172.

⁹⁹ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁰ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 158.

¹⁰¹ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 197.

¹⁰² Waters, ‘Havelock Ellis’, p. 167.

‘while the psychoanalytic language of homosexuality was certainly available between the war, rarely did it inform those life stories, or pleas for tolerance’ and states that there was in fact a ‘general reluctance of learned homosexuals in interwar Britain to adopt a Freudian subject position’.¹⁰³ There was, however, some evidence that the sexological construction of the mannish lesbian was persisting, and even becoming more visible across the classes. In her essay on the popular press in the interwar years, Alison Oram argues that newspapers such as *The News of the World* and *The People* were ‘slightly more straightforward and less ambiguous in reporting sexual transgression’.¹⁰⁴ She uses the figure of the mannish lesbian to follow this, noting that it ‘began to take up a place in the modern cityscape alongside the decadent woman and (in middlebrow journalism) the predatory older woman’.¹⁰⁵ While this suggests the mannish lesbian was becoming more discernible in popular discourse, Oram fails to elaborate on what she means by the terms ‘popular’ and ‘middlebrow’, at times seemingly using them interchangeably, and occasionally rather simplistically accepting the apparent correlation between popular and working-class, and middlebrow and middle-class. The lack of elucidation regarding these brow boundaries leads to difficulty in evaluating how far the mannish woman was identifiable within both working-class and middlebrow discourse.

Complicating matters further, Oram also argues that even during the 1930s ‘[f]emale masculinity did not automatically signal same-sex desire [...] and when it did begin to, was linked to the “rough” and threateningly cosmopolitan areas of the city,

¹⁰³ Waters, ‘Havelock Ellis’, p. 166.

¹⁰⁴ Alison Oram, “‘A Sudden Orgy of Decadence’: Writing about Sex Between Women in the Interwar Popular Press”, in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desire*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 165-80 (p. 166).

¹⁰⁵ Oram, “‘A Sudden Orgy of Decadence’”, p. 176.

rather than the respectable spaces of working-class life'.¹⁰⁶ The link that Oram alludes to between transgressive female sexuality and the cosmopolitan has echoes of the Sapphic circle of Paris during the 1920s. However, anxiety concerning boundaries of race, class and gender took on a new and more sinister significance in the 1930s under the shadow of Fascism. Erin G. Carlston argues that the coinciding of Fascism's rejection of liberal humanism and its anxiety over 'those who confused boundaries of race and place', along with the rise of industrial capitalism and its disruption of 'Western culture's organising hierarchies and boundaries', contributed to a profound 'sense of disorientation' during this period.¹⁰⁷ The modern city, as a site in which these anxieties were legible, becomes marked by disorientation, and it is perhaps not surprising that, as a consequence, the single woman who has recently taken up residence there also becomes disorientated. Deborah Parsons describes a 'retreat from the urban map' that is evident in the women's fiction of this period.¹⁰⁸ Women thus begin to feel anxiety about their position in the modern city, and, rather than actively reclaiming the streets, they are left retreading the same ground.

Parsons ascribes to this a post-war 'backlash against female emancipation'.¹⁰⁹ It is true that there has been a consensus that in the 1930s feminism was overshadowed by poverty, unemployment and Fascism.¹¹⁰ The term backlash that Parsons invokes, however, is rather misleading, implying that there was fresh resistance against the feminist cause when, in fact, some of the goals that women had been struggling towards

¹⁰⁶ Oram, "A Sudden Orgy of Decadence", p. 169.

¹⁰⁷ Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 19-21.

¹⁰⁸ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 125.

¹⁰⁹ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 125.

¹¹⁰ Trodd, *Women's Writing in English*, p. 5.

were now beginning to look increasingly achievable. This was especially true in regards to marriage and reproduction. Lesley Hall notes that during the 1930s the increased acceptance of birth control as a legitimate way of controlling family size continued from the late 1920s into the 1930s, as indicated by the renaming of the National Birth Control Association as the Family Planning Association in 1939.¹¹¹ There was also increased support for the legalisation of abortion, with the 1935 British Medical Association committee recommending abortion be available in certain, exceptional circumstances.¹¹² Marriage was also conceived of differently from the way it had been in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Marie Stopes' bestselling *Married Love* had contributed to a sea change whereby 'sex within marriage was becoming more eroticised and increasingly separated from reproduction' by the 1930s, although it is admittedly difficult to evaluate how much these changes were restricted to the middle classes.¹¹³

Work culture offered further opportunities for the refiguring of women within the family. Todd argues that because of high levels of male unemployment, it was implied that for young women 'being single was better than courting, or being married to, an unemployed man'.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the rise in young women's migration from rural to urban areas meant that occupational mobility was growing.¹¹⁵ This was exacerbated partly because of the household means test that was brought in during 1931, which meant that benefits were adjusted according to total household income.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Todd suggests that the standard of living for the working classes actually increased from the

¹¹¹ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change* p. 116.

¹¹² Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, pp. 128-30.

¹¹³ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 122.

¹¹⁴ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, p. 218.

¹¹⁵ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, p. 126.

¹¹⁶ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, p. 55.

mid-1930s onwards, and attributes this to the young female workers who were ‘largely responsible for the increase in working-class leisure and luxury consumption’.¹¹⁷ As Todd points out, luxury, or ‘conspicuous’, consumption was on the rise during the First World War, but it became more characteristic of young women’s lives during the 1930s.¹¹⁸ The rise of this among the working classes not only impacts on the delineation between classes, but also demonstrates the level of financial and social independence women had achieved.

Part III: 1940s

Although the reputation of the 1930s as a period of stasis in Britain is open to debate, the shifts in all facets of British life following the outbreak of the Second World War have been less contended. Jane Garrity has argued that during the interwar years, women had been discursively constructed as responsible for sustaining racial/national stability through reproduction’.¹¹⁹ This discourse was threatened with the outbreak of war. Gill Plain notes that while women were ‘appropriated as a symbol of peace and domesticity’, and the nation was ‘feminised as an indicator of its vulnerability and its need for protection’, domesticity was rendered ‘the object of unprecedented revulsion and ridicule’ in light of the threat it posed to the masculine, heroic figure.¹²⁰ This ambivalence is especially legible in anxiety concerning the single woman. Wartime

¹¹⁷ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, p. 82.

¹¹⁸ The concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ was established some years early by Thorstein Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Veblen criticises what he sees as the wasteful or ostentatious consumerism of the upper classes, arguing that this was a means of simply displaying one’s wealth. The work was generally thought to be a satirical swipe at middle-class imitation of the upper classes.

¹¹⁹ Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

¹²⁰ Gill Plain, *Women’s Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Resistance and Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. ix and p. 40.

propaganda of the 1940s alluded to the vulnerability of women to rape and seduction at the hands of foreign men, serving as a symbolic warning of the potential fate of the public and sexually available single woman.¹²¹ Yet, as Holden articulates, the decade has also been seen as a 'watershed in the treatment of unmarried mothers, with post-war welfare settlements offering unprecedented levels of state support'. Rates of illegitimacy more than doubled: from over four per cent of live births in 1938 to over nine per cent in 1948. Help was available though, and in 1943 the Ministry of Health advised local authorities to make 'the care of unmarried mothers their special duty rather than the preserve of the Poor Law and voluntary associations'.¹²² The vulnerability of the single woman may be emphasised, but it does not necessarily exclude her from protection.

The sexually available single woman was not always portrayed as a victim, though: she was also constructed as a 'sexual threat to the soldier's integrity and his rights'.¹²³ Although the treatment of venereal disease had improved in recent years, there was a dramatic rise in the number of cases after the outbreak of World War Two.¹²⁴ As far back as the beginning of the century, the British government was demonstrating growing concern over venereal disease. Fear over the infection of soldiers' re-emerged, and sexual disease became an enemy of the nation: an undated leaflet from the Mass-Observation archive states:

70,000 new cases of venereal diseases are now occurring in this country each year among civilians alone. The spread of these diseases is damaging our war effort, bringing tragedy into home life, and injuring children as yet unborn. How are we to stop this wastage of human health, happiness and efficiency?¹²⁵

¹²¹ Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel*, p. 90.

¹²² Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 125.

¹²³ Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, p. ix.

¹²⁴ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 133.

¹²⁵ M-O A: TC Venereal Disease, 12/1/H, 'What Are The Venereal Diseases?'

The rapid increase in VD was not only a cause for concern in terms of British troops; it was also damaging relations between Britain and the US – while the US had introduced numerous measures to clamp down on the spread of VD, Britain was still dragging its heels despite warnings from health officials.¹²⁶ The prospect of its GIs being debilitated through contracting sexually transmitted infections from British women angered the American army and government. In 1942, following mounting pressure, the British government introduced Defence Regulation 33b, a statute that made it compulsory for anyone named by at least two separate people to be a known carrier of VD to be investigated and treated.

As with the Contagious Disease Acts of the nineteenth century, these regulations were indicative of concern over female promiscuity, which had become subject to categorisation and scientific investigation (as seen in articles such as the ‘Psychiatric Treatment of Promiscuous Girls’).¹²⁷ Another article, ‘Some Psychological Aspects of Sexual Promiscuity’, reprinted from a journal entitled *Psychosomatic Medicine*, suggests that the ‘habitually promiscuous’ have an excessive ‘self-love’, an ‘anxious and undue attachment’ to the mother and an ‘ill-concealed, or even outspoken hostility toward the father’. Significantly, the article lays responsibility for controlling male promiscuity at the feet of women, as nineteenth-century legislation did, suggesting that it may be useful to create a ‘homely atmosphere in the canteens and clubs which are run for the soldier. The female staff needed to create this should be sisterly or maternal, rather than

¹²⁶ See Christopher Hudson, ‘Sex Please – We’re British’, *The Times Online*, 11 December 2005 <www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2099-1899423_1,00.html> [accessed 9 September 2006].

¹²⁷ M-O A: TC Supportive Material and Material Predating the 1949 Survey, 12/15/C, ‘An Experiment in the Psychiatric Treatment of Promiscuous Girls’, 1945.

matriarchal, in their attitudes towards men, and should invite confidences, rather than prevent them through differences of accent, outlook and social background'.¹²⁸ The clear Freudian overtones of the article signal the continued reliance on maternal and paternal metaphors to understand female sexuality.

Pamphlets like these also demonstrate the popularisation of psychoanalysis by the 1940s. The assumption that psychoanalysis simply usurped sexology as the dominant narrative of sexuality is misleading, however. Chris Waters argues that a fuller investigation of how psychoanalysis 'came to acquire the status' it has is needed, especially considering that Britain appeared notably more sceptical about its application than America.¹²⁹ Waters questions the underlying assumption that psychoanalysis somehow overtook sexology, as though the two were rival discourses. Alison Oram and Annemarie Turnbull contend that '[p]sychoanalytic explanations [of lesbianism] were clearly in evidence among British medical commentators by the 1940s, alongside a continuing model of inherent and acquired homosexuality, which often had some reference to glandular abnormality'.¹³⁰ Thus, the divisions between the biological origins of sexology and the psychic drives of psychoanalysis were not always distinct. Rita Felski appears to agree, suggesting that the popularity of Freudianism has created a:

seemingly impenetrable barrier between the modern view of sexuality as an enigmatic and often labile psychic field rooted in unconscious desires, and the work of nineteenth-century sexologists [...] with its emphasis on the physiological and congenital roots of human erotic experience.¹³¹

¹²⁸ M-O A: TC Venereal Disease, 12/1/H, 'Some Psychological Aspects of Promiscuity', October 1944.

¹²⁹ Waters, 'Havelock Ellis', pp. 167-9.

¹³⁰ Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p. 95.

¹³¹ Felski, 'Introduction', p. 1.

Thus, it becomes possible to see sexology and psychoanalysis as co-dependent constructs, rather than mutually exclusive concepts.

The ongoing debates concerning homosexuality at this time were symptomatic of continued social unease over transgressive female sexuality in general. Female involvement in the war effort was still subject to sexual scrutiny. Hall describes the stigmatisation of the Auxiliary Transport Service (ATS), and the accusations of promiscuity, heavy drinking and disciplinary problems levelled against its female workers, but reveals that a government investigation of the concerns disproved them.¹³² Perhaps more unexpected is the ‘surprisingly muted’ fear about lesbianism, which Hall argues was dealt with discreetly and often merely involved the reposting of women under suspicion’.¹³³ Female engagement with war work was far-reaching. As Hall observes ‘[s]ingle women were free to serve their country, and were counted as “mobile” labour’.¹³⁴ Todd concurs, arguing that the introduction of conscription in 1941 meant that even women from more rural communities became members of the female workforce, further ‘encouraging households to value daughters’ economic contributions’.¹³⁵ As of April 1942, all women were considered eligible for labour transfer, this time to the Midlands to work in munitions and manufacturing.¹³⁶

The extent of female involvement in war work meant that this had an impact on the leisure lifestyles of working-class women. Todd claims that transferring from urban to rural areas often left women feeling isolated, and they were unable to enjoy the degree of

¹³² Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 143.

¹³³ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 144.

¹³⁴ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, pp. 142-3.

¹³⁵ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, pp. 79-80.

¹³⁶ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, p. 131.

leisure they had been able to in the towns from which they had come. Nevertheless, women in general were enjoying unprecedented levels of leisure, and were no longer relying on courtship to facilitate this.¹³⁷ The working environment was also encouraging new networks of female friendship away from parental supervision, and contributing to a strong sense of entitlement; women war workers were sharing cosmetics in factories and taking an interest in fashion, in an effort to demonstrate individuality while wearing drab uniforms.¹³⁸ The single woman's independence and confidence now appeared even greater during this decade than it had in any previous era.

Conclusions

Alison Oram and Annemarie Turnbull have tried to develop understandings of lesbian history by urging to critics to look at how 'constructions of femininity and deviance were negotiated and how they intersected with class, ethnicity and occupation'.¹³⁹ In a sense the history of the single woman must do the same in order to track the myriad and conflicting representations of this crucial figure.¹⁴⁰ During the sixty years between 1880 and 1940, conceptions of gender and sexuality were constantly transforming alongside a range of cultural developments. From 1880 to the 1920s, there was a drive towards female emancipation from oppressive and, at times, archaic legislation that kept women confined to the domestic sphere. This drive came from legal reformers, from the social purity movement, from suffragettes and from feminists. Though their victories may not

¹³⁷ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, pp. 218-20.

¹³⁸ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*, p. 200.

¹³⁹ Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ Although texts such as Eliot Bliss' *Saraband* (1931) and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) offer the possibility for the single woman to be discussed in relation to ethnicity, race has not emerged as a key theme in the other texts I have selected. I hope that the issue of race and the single woman is taken up in another project, one with broader scope than my own.

have been complete, various changes to marital legislation began to form a more distinct identity for the married woman that was increasingly separate from her husband's. At the same time, the roles of women (both married and single) were changing in response to the outbreak of war. Women began to step out from the confines of the domestic sphere, and assume an important role in working life. Anxiety over this change in gender roles coincided with shifts in cultural understandings of sexuality. These understandings arose out of and were coded in a scientific discourse that can be traced to Darwinian ideology. Sexology and psychoanalysis began to construct modes of normative and non-normative sexuality; this, in turn, led to an increasing desire to categorise men and women according to their sexual identities; and, more usually, their hetero- or homosexual identities. The single woman becomes the site in which all these anxieties coincide, and she encapsulates the pull between traditional and rigidly-drawn conceptions of women and female sexuality, and more progressive and modern ones.

These types of single woman occur repeatedly throughout women's fiction of the 1920s, 30s and 40s, and I track them across a range of texts and across the boundaries of cultural hierarchies. In doing so, I emphasises the fragmentation, overlap and incoherence of the disparate identities for the single woman, and how each marks her as transgressive. This emphasises the difficulties in distinguishing between hetero- and homosexual desire. It also becomes part of a dialogue concerning the reimagining of cultural hierarchies during this period. As we will see in the next three chapters, these different types of single women populate a spectrum of fictions associated with the middlebrow and modernism. By situating the single woman in amongst the perceived tensions between these two cultures – in discourses concerning the rural and the urban, tradition and

modernity, hetero- and homosexual – I demonstrate not only the ambiguity of the contexts in which she is depicted, but the ambiguities of the single woman herself.

Chapter Three

The Golden Age: The Single Woman and Crime Fiction

By the early twentieth century, a particular kind of detective narrative was dominating the British crime fiction market. The whodunit usually revolved around a murder which occurred in an enclosed or domestic setting, and was typified by multiple suspects and an emphasis on rational detection.¹ Plot was usually privileged over characterisation, which tended to be cursory and superficial, and the increasing intricacy of the narratives meant that the sub-genre was, as Lee Horsley notes, a ‘highly stylised [form of] crime writing’.² The conventions of this golden age fiction have meant that it has often been read as a conservative form of literature. Horsley has argued that narratives followed a rigid pattern of ‘death-detection-explanation’, ending with ‘a satisfying sense of completion and closure’.³ As Alison Light has observed, what was ‘most noticeable about the appearance of the whodunit, and most paradoxical, [was] the removal of the threat of violence’.⁴ The tameness of the genre, with its sanitary corpses and the restoration of a usually bourgeois social order, meant that violence was always contained by the whodunit. This famously came under fire from the American hard-boiled novelist, Raymond Chandler, who attacked British golden age fictions, and particularly the country-house murder for being too detached from reality.⁵ In doing so, Chandler’s article codified the supposed divide in crime fiction of this period, pitting the British ‘cosy’ mystery against American hard-

¹ Stephen Knight, ‘The Golden Age’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 77-94.

² Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 38.

³ Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p. 12.

⁴ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 69.

⁵ Raymond Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1944, pp. 53-9 (p. 56).

boiled detective fiction. The perception of British golden age fiction as domestic, rural and feminine has persisted, even if critics have begun to recognise that the transatlantic divide may not be as rigid as has been supposed.⁶

The cosiness of the genre has been read as a deliberate narrative strategy. Alison Light positions it as a ‘literature of convalescence’, designed more to ‘relieve generalised anxiety than to generate strong emotion’ in the wake of the First World War.⁷ Horsley seems to concur, suggesting that the containment of violence:

reinforces the formal closure of the narrative and symbolises what many later writers and critics have felt to be a constricting intellectual and emotional retreat from uncomfortable realities, the diversion of an insular community turning its back on much that was of importance in inter-war society.⁸

Criticism has looked repeatedly to the work of Agatha Christie, one of the figureheads of the movement, as exemplary of this insularity. Scaggs notes that ‘Christie’s influence on the genre [of crime fiction] is enormous’ and credits her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) with inaugurating the period of the golden age. He also cites her as instrumental in the development of the country-house murder.⁹ Knight goes as far as to suggest that Christie ‘fashioned a form that ratified conservatism’ in which she ‘recreated the values of the English property-owning bourgeoisie’.¹⁰ Light has perhaps best summed up the enduring image of Christie: ‘Her settings are assumed to be inherently backward-looking, her social attitudes simply snobbish, and her imaginary milieux an idealised picture of “the long summers” of the English upper-middle class in a tightly bound

⁶ See, for example: Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p. 14 and Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 20.

⁷ Light, *Forever England*, pp. 66-71.

⁸ Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, pp. 38-9.

⁹ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 26.

¹⁰ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 107 and p. 133.

society'.¹¹ Accordingly, golden age fictions have come to be seen as emblematic of middle-class values and culture: an elegy to the bourgeois order that was disintegrating in the early years of the twentieth century.¹²

Christie's reputation has also been hampered by her writing style. In 1944, Edmund Wilson wrote of his dislike of crime fiction in the *New Yorker*, dismissing Christie's writing in particular as 'of a mawkishness and banality which seems to me literally impossible to read'.¹³ Light suggests that this attitude to Christie has remained: 'It may be respectable to write about Conan Doyle or even Raymond Chandler, but Christie remains beyond the pale, the producer of harmless drivel, an unsuitable case for a critic'.¹⁴ The accessibility of Christie's writing may have drawn detractors, but the discussion of it within criticism helps to illuminate the ideologies of cultural hierarchy at work in the reception of her fiction. As I have described in Chapter One, detective fiction gradually acquired the status of serious literature in the early years of the twentieth century, but the extent to which this status can be read as emblematic of highbrow or middlebrow culture is debatable. The ratiocinative elements of golden age detective fiction mean that it can be read as a form of low modernism. As Knight points out, however, many readers were unable to actually solve the puzzle that Christie and other whodunit readers invited them to. Nevertheless, he suggests that the:

crucial ideological force of the clue-puzzle which marshalled the simple skills of a respectable, leisured, reading public, applauds them in their own personalised

¹¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 62.

¹² See Chapter One, pp. 54-6, for a fuller discussion.

¹³ Edmund Wilson, 'Why Do People Read Detective Stories?', *The New Yorker*, 14 October 1944 <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1944/10/14/1944_10_14_078_TNY_CARDS_000016796> [accessed 14 September 2010]

¹⁴ Light, *Forever England*, p. 64.

defence system, with an acquiring agent to represent the reader who could only *aspire* to such observing and ordering powers.¹⁵

The aspirations of a reading public that Knight seems to identify as middle class resonates with debates concerning middlebrow culture during the interwar years. Fictions associated with the middlebrow were often seen as parasitical, appropriating highbrow values and making them accessible, without really understanding them. Knight's reading of Christie as an author who offered her readers the fantasy that they were intellectuals implicitly reinforces the connection between the middlebrow and middle-class values.

Alison Light has been instrumental in re-evaluating the values ascribed to Christie's texts. She argues that her work is characterised by what she terms 'conservative modernity', a 'very different kind of conservatism [...] which went straight to the heart of new kinds of anxiety about English social life and new ideas of the English'.¹⁶ Rather than reading her work as an unproblematic reiteration of bourgeois values, Light details how Christie subverts them by engaging with a more modern conception of the English class system. She challenges the notion that Christie was in thrall to the upper classes, for example, claiming that '[h]er aristocrats are often an unsavoury bunch' and she is 'largely indifferent to the[ir] doings'.¹⁷ She similarly modifies Christie's position as queen of the country house, a literary tradition which inscribes bourgeois values, arguing that 'where she does use big houses, they are seldom described as repositories of national character or a lost civility; it is their character as private homes which appeals to her'.¹⁸ Light further destabilises the juxtaposition of the

¹⁵ Knight, *Form and Ideology*, p. 107 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶ Light, *Forever England*, pp. 64-5.

¹⁷ Light, *Forever England*, p. 80.

¹⁸ Light, *Forever England*, p. 81.

rural and urban spheres that have been used to contrast the American hard-boiled novel with British golden age fiction, discrediting a direct correlation between the rural and the supposedly 'backward looking' position of Christie.¹⁹ The traditions and sense of permanence associated with the rural sphere, qualities that themselves invoke notions of safety and order, are absent from Christie's texts. Light's analysis of Christie's fiction problematises the association of golden age texts with rural domesticity and middle-class life, and suggests a way of reading against the supposed conservatism of the genre.

In her argument, however, Light distinguishes Christie from contemporaries such as Dorothy L. Sayers and Ngaio Marsh, suggesting that Christie's texts are problematic in a way that fictions produced by these other authors are not. But she largely ignores one of the main similarities between texts by these writers: namely, the depiction of the detective. The figure of the detective became less heroic and more feminised in the crime fiction of this period. Two of Christie's detectives were prime examples of this. Both Miss Marple and Poirot disrupt the alignment of the detective with masculine order since each use what Susan Rowland terms 'feminised resources of practice'.²⁰ Miss Marple, for instance, uses her position as spinster to gather information through gossip, and her gender and age function as a cover for her astuteness and success. The 'method and focus' of Poirot, as Knight puts it, 'are primarily domestic: a central question is why the spills on the mantelpiece were rearranged'.²¹ Poirot embodies the foppish elements of the golden age detective, elements also linked to Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey. Wimsey remains plagued by shell shock following his experiences in the First World War, and the

¹⁹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 93.

²⁰ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 20.

²¹ Knight, 'The Golden Age', p. 82.

condition he suffers from has been read by critics as an indicator of his feminisation. Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn who initially appears as a more traditional and professional detective figure is also of aristocratic descent, and his relationship with his mother (whom he praises as 'the perfect woman' in *Artists in Crime*) distances him from the masculine detachment of Sherlock Holmes, for example. The involvement of both Wimsey and Alleyn in romance plots – Wimsey with Harriet Vane and Alleyn with the androgynous Agatha Troy – also signals a more moderate masculinity.

Sociological interpretations of these changes in the detective have varied. Stephen Knight has described how during the interwar years, both the production and readership of crime fiction changed.²² In the nineteenth century, the mainstay of the crime narrative was the short story, popularised in magazines with a predominantly male demographic. By contrast, the clue-puzzle was a novelised form circulated mainly in lending libraries that had grown popular with a female, middle-class readership. Knight also asserts that the domination of the market by female authors had a noticeable effect. He memorably claims of Christie that as 'a woman she had no interest in the active male narcissism common to much crime fiction'.²³ Knight articulates what remains implicit in much criticism of golden age fiction: the domination of the form by Christie and 'a galaxy of somewhat lesser "Queens of Crime"',²⁴ as Priestman rather patronisingly terms them, had a natural and inevitable effect on the characterisation of masculinity, and by inference, femininity. Light, by contrast, has attributed the increasingly anti-heroic sentiment of the genre to the effect of the First World War, arguing that 'the notion of the conquering

²² Knight, 'The Golden Age', p. 81.

²³ Knight, *Form and Ideology*, p. 107.

²⁴ Martin Priestman, 'Introduction: Crime Fiction and Detective Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-6 (p. 2).

detective [became] unpalatable' following the violent reality of a bloody battle.²⁵ She does, however, suggest that Christie's fiction 'spoke to the new home-centred pleasures of her expanding readership, of which the whodunit was one'.²⁶ These various interpretations, then, still share a focus on readerships and authorships, and their impact on the crime fiction market at this time.

What these studies have perhaps not adequately taken into account is how the feminisation of the detective figure is part of a wider instability of narrative ideology, where constructions of gender and sexuality are problematically delineated. Susan Rowland suggests that the women writers of the golden age played with the idea of feminising the detective 'as if it was a secure construction of masculinity', which she reads as demonstrative of their 'self-conscious artifice'.²⁷ Gill Plain goes further by arguing that '[g]ender transgression and the disruption of "normative" sexuality have always been an integral part of crime narrative', and suggests that in concentrating on the textuality of crime narratives, as opposed to the conservative restoration of order in their resolution, we can identify a 'resistance to reductive gender categories'.²⁸ Adopting Plain's approach offers the chance to reconsider the conflicting ideologies at work in golden age fictions. I therefore analyse a wide range of transgressive female sexuality in the texts I have selected, in relation to the tropes and conventions of crime fiction as well as sociohistorical constructions of gender and sexuality. Doing so enables me to illustrate the disruption of discrete gender categories. I do this by moving away from a preoccupation with the central detective figure. Heather Worthington has argued that 'the

²⁵ Light, *Forever England*, p. 72.

²⁶ Light, *Forever England*, p. 74.

²⁷ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 18.

²⁸ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p. 5.

development of crime fiction as a genre [...] has come to focus on the detective, rather [...] on the criminal'.²⁹ I open up the potential of reading crime narratives as a site of conflicting ideologies by focusing on the representation of the single woman in crime fiction and the different forms she appears in: as victim, witness, murderer and suspect.

Using the single woman as a starting point, I interrogate the perceived conservatism of the genre by examining the different tensions that the single woman herself encapsulates. Many of the tropes that Light has concentrated on in her discussion of Christie are useful in doing this. Tracking the various categories of the single woman outlined in Chapter Three in relation to the rural, the feminine and the domestic, means that assumptions concerning these depictions in golden age crime fiction can be challenged. This has significant implications for how we conceptualise the genre. A reconsideration of the form affects its relationship to both middlebrow and modernist culture by illuminating the overlaps and interplay between those cultural forms. For example, Light argues that Christie's texts are characterised by their conservative modernity, but does so partly to establish Christie as a 'modernist spirit', suggesting an unproblematic alignment of modernity with modernism.³⁰ At the same time, she positions Christie as a 'queen of the "middlebrows"', acknowledging how the middlebrow engaged with modernity, but appearing to understand it as a category that was synonymous with the middle classes, and situated squarely between the lowbrow and the highbrow.³¹ The conceptualisation of middlebrow and modernism in relation to crime fiction, therefore, requires more reflection. The figure of the single woman allows us to do this, by calling

²⁹ Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 172.

³⁰ Light, *Forever England*, p. 61.

³¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 75.

into question the supposed values of middlebrow and modernist culture. It is important to remember, however, that the conventions of crime fiction demand that the sexual deviance of the single woman be measured against criminal deviance. If crime narratives are thought to function as a means of restoring an order that has been disrupted, then it follows that sexual transgression must also be somehow circumvented. However, if sexual transgressions are unresolved, as I suggest that they are, then order cannot be fully restored. The gender and sexual ambiguities of the single woman, and the effect these have on constructions of the rural and the urban, and tradition and modernity, can firstly, call into question how criminality is delineated in relation to sexual deviance and, secondly, reveal that criminality can apparently not be conceived of as separate from transgressive sexuality.

These are the central issues that I explore in my chosen texts. Sayers and Marsh are two of the 'Four Queens' of the English country-house murder that dominated the genre in this period.³² Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1927) and Marsh's *Artists in Crime* (1938) were both published within the accepted parameters of the golden age period, as was Dorothy Bowers' *Fear and Miss Betony* (1941). *Unnatural Death* is significant in its exploration of female homosexual desire, narrating the crimes of the lesbian killer, Mary Whittaker. This novel, like the others discussed here, is rife with other forms of single women, constructed largely in terms of their problematic sexuality. However, the way in which these texts appear to draw crudely on psychoanalytic conceptions of female sexuality make them of especial interest in tracking the difficulties in distinguishing between normative and non-normative sexuality. Neither Bowers' text nor Josephine

³² Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. vii.

Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948) are traditionally associated with the country-house detective novel, yet both speak to its traditions, as does Marsh's *Artists in Crime* (the only text in which we witness a country-house murder). In considering how the significations of the country house are actually more conflicting and ambiguous than previously supposed, I argue that these texts do not simply reiterate conventions, but play with them.

Below, as in the following chapters, I first discuss the authors of the novels that I examine, contextualising their position with brow boundaries, before moving on to close analysis of the texts. The large and diverse selection of writers I have included means it is important to consider how they have been positioned by literary critics. Given that authorship has been a means of delineating brow boundaries, this allows me to further interrogate cultural hierarchy by summarising the range of fiction produced by these authors to indicate the diversity of their writings. Biographical and literary connections are also considered where appropriate as a further method of questioning the position of writers within cultural hierarchies. On the one hand, this can collapse boundaries between modernist and middlebrow culture yet, on the other, it can also expand the scope of those categories to include genre writers such as crime fiction novelists. In examining the single woman in the context of debates that themselves have a direct impact on how golden age crime fiction is envisioned, I establish how the single woman destabilises constructions of gender and sexuality and the narrative ideologies of golden age crime fiction itself.

Section One: Authors

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)

Sayers was an accomplished novelist, dramatist and poet, but she is probably best known as one of the 'Four Queens' of the British crime fiction novel along with Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham and Agatha Christie. She produced detective fiction only during the interwar years, publishing her first novel *Whose Body* in 1923 and ending her run of crime fiction in 1939 with the short story collection, *In the Teeth of the Evidence*. Nevertheless, the fiction she produced during these years was enough to secure her position as one of the most popular British female crime fiction authors. Her novels largely conform to the mode of the whodunit, and usually utilises a central sleuth figure in the form of the aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey. Although with the advent of war she turned away from crime fiction to concentrate on writing essays and religious plays, she nevertheless held the position of President of the Detection Club from 1949 until her death in 1957. Formed in 1930 by a group of mystery novelists, the Detection Club was pivotal in establishing the conventions of the whodunit, whose form offered readers the chance to solve the mystery for themselves; Sayers, along with Christie, was fundamental to its inception.

Although approaches to her work have been varied, there has been an undeniable emphasis on the representation of gender within her crime narratives. This has not always been confined to the depiction of women. The portrayal of her protagonist, Wimsey, as a foppish aristocrat has been read by critics such as Alison Light and Gill Plain as a tempering of the masculine heroics that had characterised turn-of-the-century crime

fiction.³³ At the same time, Sayers' detective novels repeatedly engage with representations of problematic female bodies: spinsters, lesbians, nymphomaniacs and New Women, and in this respect, her novels can be compared with Ngaio Marsh's. The two novels of Sayers that have proved especially ripe for such critical analysis have been *Strong Poison* (1930) and *Gaudy Night* (1935). The first marks the introduction of Wimsey's future wife, Harriet Vane, as a potential murder suspect, while the second revolves around a possible murder plot at the college where Harriet works. The latter draws upon Sayers' own experiences at Somerville College. In *Dangerous by Degrees*, Susan J. Leonardi explores the motif of the 'independent and competent women' in Sayers's fiction as indicative of interwar anxiety concerning women in higher education.³⁴ Susan Rowland, meanwhile, compares Sayers' fiction to Marsh's, positioning them as part of a golden age tradition in which gender 'tends to be inscribed as a masquerade', while sexuality 'becomes the sinister aspect of a society of social masks'.³⁵ The interplay of gender, sexuality and criminality in Sayers' fiction means her work can be read as part of a wider dialogue concerning the threat that the single woman poses in the interwar period. Simultaneously, the juxtaposition of urban and rural settings in her work and her interest in modern subjects suggest an affiliation with middlebrow culture.

³³ See Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991) and Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

³⁴ Susan J. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

³⁵ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 162.

Ngaio Marsh (1895-1998)

Marsh produced thirty-two crime fiction stories during her career as a mystery novelist. Although she was born in New Zealand, she first came to Britain in 1928 and was so enamoured with it that she would spend the rest of her life dividing her time between the two countries. Her biographer, Joanne Drayton, describes Marsh as an outsider in both her native country and Britain, ‘a wanderer between worlds, never belonging completely to any place or culture’.³⁶ While Drayton’s description may well reflect Marsh’s own ambivalence concerning her national identity, it certainly did not prevent her from becoming one of the ‘Four Queens’ of the British crime fiction novel. Only a handful of her texts are set in New Zealand, and instead Marsh favours decidedly English settings for her work; indeed, she would become one of the chief exponents of the English country-house murder.³⁷ Marsh’s novels, like Sayers’, are whodunits, and they employ a similarly upper-class male sleuth, Inspector Roderick Alleyn. Described by Jane Stafford as ‘less eccentric than [...] Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey’,³⁸ Alleyn also becomes involved in a romance plot through several of Marsh’s narratives, with the rather more androgynous and bohemian Agatha Troy.

Marsh enjoyed considerable popularity during her career. Initially her novels were published by Geoffrey Bles, but after *Artists in Crime* (1938), Marsh managed to secure a deal with Collins (who were also publishing Agatha Christie at the time). The extent of Marsh’s popularity became clear in 1949 when, in conjunction with Penguin, Collins

³⁶ Joanna Drayton, *Ngaio Marsh: Her Life In Crime* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 26.

³⁷ As Stephen Knight has noted, the isolated country house was ‘the archetypal setting’ of English detective fiction. See Stephen Knight, ‘The Golden Age’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 77-94.

³⁸ Jane Stafford, ‘Ngaio Marsh’, in *The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing in English*, ed. by Lorna Sage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 442-3 (p. 423).

released ten of her novels simultaneously, with a print run of 100,000 copies per title: the only authors who could boast the same were George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells and Christie.³⁹ She has not, however, received quite the level of critical attention Sayers has. There have been only a handful of biographies,⁴⁰ and although her name appears routinely in encyclopaedias and surveys of crime fiction, individual criticism is becoming scarcer. Her name is most often in circulation in studies of female crime writers, although the extent to which these studies really engage with her fiction varies. She is mentioned only briefly in Gill Plain's *Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (1996) and Sally Munt's *Murder by the Book?* (1994).⁴¹ She is, however, one of the writers Rowland focuses on in *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*. Critical emphasis has fallen on Marsh's representation of women and marriage, and Rowland's study looks at texts such as *Death in Ecstasy* (1936) and *Artists in Crime* (1938). As with Sayers, an explicit consideration of Marsh's fiction in the context of cultural hierarchies has been absent, yet her use of the country house means her books can be offer possibilities for interrogating the bourgeois values associated with golden age crime fiction.

Dorothy Bowers (1902 – 1948)

When Dorothy Bowers' first novel, *Postscript to Poison*, was published in 1938, a review in *The Times* speculated that 'if her succeeding books maintain the level of her first [she]

³⁹ Drayton, *Ngaio Marsh*, p. 172.

⁴⁰ These include Margaret Lewis, *Ngaio Marsh, A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) and Drayton, *Ngaio Marsh*.

⁴¹ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994).

should make a name in detective fiction.’⁴² The review article proposes that Bowers belongs in the same league as the ‘Four Queens’ of British crime fiction. It may initially have appeared that *The Times*’ prediction had been an astute one. Bowers followed up her debut novel with a range of titles in quick succession – *Shadows Before* (1939); *Deed Without a Name* (1940); *Fear and Miss Betony* (1941); and *The Bells at Old Bailey* (1947). All of her works were published by Hodder and Stoughton in the UK and, within a year, republished in the US by Doubleday and Company. Formed in 1868, Hodder and Stoughton were, by their own admission, publishing ‘an explosion of commercial fiction at keen prices’ by the 1920s.⁴³ While circulation figures are unavailable for Bowers titles, their publication by Hodder and Stoughton suggests that they were marketable material. Bowers’ impact on the literary market certainly seemed to be continuing into the 1940s; *The Times* named *Fear and Miss Betony* ‘the best mystery of 1941’, and the novel was also selected by the mystery critic James Sandoe ‘for inclusion in his *Reader’s Guide to Crime*, a list of mystery high spots he recommended as required acquisitions for any library wishing to have a representative collection of detective fiction’.⁴⁴ Her admittance into the Detection Club in 1948 (the only person to be admitted in that year) looked as if it would cement her reputation as a credible and respected golden age fiction writer.⁴⁵

Yet, only a few years after her death, all five novels that she had published in her brief writing career were out of print.⁴⁶ This, along with her limited literary output (no

⁴² ‘New Detective Stories: Deadlier Than The Male’, *The Times*, 6 Sept 1938 <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/informark/262/846/79281714w16/purl=rc1_TTDA> [accessed 6 November 2009]

⁴³ ‘Hodder and Stoughton: About Us’ <<http://www.hodder.co.uk/AboutUs/CompanyProfile.aspx>> [accessed 6 November 2009]

⁴⁴ ‘Dorothy Bowers’ <<http://www.ruemorguepress.com/authors/bowers.html>> [accessed 6 November 2009]

⁴⁵ ‘Dorothy Bowers’ <<http://www.ruemorguepress.com/authors/bowers.html>> [accessed 6 November 2009]

⁴⁶ ‘Dorothy Bowers’ <<http://www.ruemorguepress.com/authors/bowers.html>> [accessed 6 November 2009]

doubt cut short by her early death from tuberculosis) may account for the way in which Bowers' work has been omitted from the large body of twentieth-century crime fiction studies. John M. Reilly's expansive *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers* has no entry on her and key crime fiction critics including Stephen Knight, Martin Priestman, Lee Horsley and Julian Symons make no reference to her in any of their crime fiction works.⁴⁷ In 2005-6, the Rue Morgue Press, a small American publisher specialising in the reprinting of (often forgotten) golden age detective fiction reprinted all of Bowers' novels. Even this has led to no discernible recuperation of Bowers, and I have been unable to find a single scholarly article that makes reference to her work.

Born in Leominster, Herefordshire in 1902, Bowers grew up in the small market town of Monmouth; like Sayers, her upbringing was middle class and educated. She pursued a Modern History degree at Oxford University, before taking various teaching posts while she began her writing career. Although the majority of her work falls outside of the usual parameters of golden age crime fiction, it is clear that it had much in common with novels by other women writers of the tradition. Indeed, the Rue Morgue Press claim that after the publication of her debut novel, *Postscript to Poison* (1938), 'many contemporary critics [...] said she was the logical successor to Dorothy L Sayers' (although quite who these critics are I have been unable to find out).⁴⁸ Certainly *The Times*' review of the novel was explicit in praising Bowers as 'considerably adept not only in contriving a plot to puzzle readers, but in characterisation and command of

⁴⁷ Knight's article 'The Golden Age' does not include her and she is also absent from Lee Horsley's *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Julian Symons' omission of Bowers in *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) is especially curious, given his presidency of the Detection Club from 1976 until 1985.

⁴⁸ 'Dorothy Bowers' <http://www.ruemorguepress.com/authors/bowers.html>> [accessed 6 November 2009]

situation'.⁴⁹ Bowers followed conventions closely enough to be inducted into the Detection Club in the last year of her life. All of her texts were whodunits, and most of them included the sleuth Chief Inspector Dan Pardoe, a member of Scotland Yard. *Postscript to Poison* (1938) draws on the country-house murder, with its poison plot and issues of family inheritance, and her second novel, *Shadows Before* (1939), continues in a similar vein. There was a slight change of tack for *Fear and Miss Betony* (1941); although Pardoe is present, he is no longer the chief detective figure. Instead, drawing from the tradition of the 'spinster-sleuth',⁵⁰ the text features the retired schoolmistress Miss Betony. By the time of Bowers' final novel, however, the figure of Pardoe was no longer present, and she instead used a new police detective as her central character. Whether this change of character may have signalled a new direction for Bowers will never be known, but the body of work she left shows similarities to other crime writers of the period.

Josephine Tey (1896 – 1952)

Born in Inverness in 1896, Elizabeth Mackintosh produced a wide selection of crime fiction and plays under the pseudonyms of Gordon Daviot and Josephine Tey before her death in 1952. *Richard of Bordeaux* (1932) is probably Tey's best-known play, making a star of John Gielgud who starred in and produced its London debut in 1933, but she

⁴⁹ 'New Detective Stories: Deadlier Than The Male', *The Times*, 6 Sept 1938
<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/informark/262/846/79281714w16/purl=rc1_TTDA> [accessed 6 November 2009]

⁵⁰ The classic example of this of course was Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, but others include Patricia Wentworth's Miss Maud Silver, Stuart Palmer's Miss Mildegarde Withers and Josephine Tey's Miss Lucy Pym.

arguably remains a writer best known for the eight crime fiction novels she published between 1929 and 1952, and their various television and radio adaptations.

Although not a household name like Sayers or Marsh, Tey has received both popular success and critical attention. As Nicola Upson says of her decision to use Tey as a figure in her books:

I was certainly apprehensive when the book came out because Tey *is* so well-loved; she may not be as prolific or as widely-read as some of her contemporaries, but the readers who know about her rate her so highly that it did feel a little bit dangerous.⁵¹

This sentiment appears to echo throughout recent criticism. In a blog written for *The Guardian*, Sarah Waters explains how Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948) was one of the inspirations for her tale of a haunted house in *The Little Strangers* (2009). She also points out that *The Daughter of Time* (1951) and *The Franchise Affair* were ranked 1st and 11th, respectively, in the 1990 Crime Writers' Association Top 100 Crime Novels,⁵² and they appear regularly in similar polls. In 2003, Washington Post (and Pulitzer Prize-winning) book critic Jonathan Yardley wrote an entry on Tey as part of a series of articles devoted to reconsidering 'neglected books from the past', arguing that *The Daughter of Time* 'deserves to be read as a work of literate (even literary) fiction, not just a detective story'.⁵³

Tey's status as a notable mystery novelist is sometimes reiterated in twentieth-century crime fiction studies, yet relatively little time is spent actually discussing her

⁵¹ 'Crime Writers Q & A: Nicola Upson' <<http://www.faber.co.uk/article/2008/9/crime-writers-q-nicola-upson>> [accessed 13 November 2009]

⁵² Sarah Waters, 'The Lost Girl', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/30/sarah-waters-books>> [accessed 15 October 2009]

⁵³ Jonathan Yardley, 'Josephine Tey, Sleuthing Into The Mystery of History', *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2003 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/1A13181-2003Mar11?language>> [accessed 13 November 2009]

work. A recent festschrift celebrating Tey failed to engage with her fiction in any sustained, critical way.⁵⁴ Stephen Knight merely includes Tey in a list of writers who were ‘admired in the [golden age] period and still command respect’, yet does not demonstrate why.⁵⁵ Lee Horsley names her alongside Sayers and Marsh in *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* as an exemplar of the golden age, with no real exploration of why this is.⁵⁶ Kathleen G. Klein similarly compares her to Sayers and Marsh, noting that although there are differences in their works, Tey’s texts ‘undoubtedly belongs to the golden age of detective fiction, since her style is pure, her plots and characters carefully wrought, and her adherence to the classical traditions dependable’.⁵⁷ There is a consensus that she is a golden age writer, yet most of her fiction was actually published during the Second World War.⁵⁸ Julian Symons is one of the few critics who does take this into account, labelling her a ‘post-war writer’ in *Bloody Murder*.⁵⁹ While Symons concedes that there is ‘something original’ about Tey’s works, he fails to elaborate on this, instead proclaiming *The Franchise Affair* ‘a little disappointing’ and *The Daughter of Time* (cited by most as the best of Tey’s detective fiction) an ‘amateur rehashing of a well-known argument’ that is ‘really rather dull’.⁶⁰

The originality that Symons refers to is likely to be Tey’s manipulation of golden age conventions. While much of Tey’s work does fit into the mould of the classic

⁵⁴ Geraldine Perrigiam, ed., *Josephine Tey: A Celebration: a Festschrift on the Life and Work of Josephine Tey* (Glasgow: Black Rock Press, 2004).

⁵⁵ Knight, ‘The Golden Age’, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ Kathleen G Klein, ‘Josephine Tey’, in *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, ed. by James M. Reilly (London: St. James Press, 1985), pp. 1373-6.

⁵⁸ Of course, the dating of the golden age, as with all cultural/literary movements, is somewhat arbitrary. Yet, as we have seen in the discussion of cultural hierarchies, an acknowledgement of texts and/or authors that fall outside broad parameters is vital in the deconstruction of those parameters.

⁵⁹ Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 155.

⁶⁰ Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 155.

detective novel, her main sleuth, Inspector Alan Grant, differs from Marsh's Alleyn and Sayers' Wimsey. Rowland notes that Grant is not an infallible detective, and sometimes simply gets it wrong.⁶¹ Neither is he consistently the central detective figure: in *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946), the eponymous Lucy Pym appears as a spinster-sleuth, and in *The Franchise Affair*, a local solicitor, Robert Blair, is the driving detective figure, while Grant merely lurks in the background. Characterisations aside, the mechanics of Tey's plot are really what separates her work from other female-authored crime fiction. Rather than whodunits, much of her fiction can be read largely as 'howdunits'. In *The Franchise Affair*, the Sharpes are accused by the fifteen-year-old Betty Kane of having held her captive for a month in their country house. It is clear from the beginning of the book that neither Marion Sharpe nor her elderly mother is a credible suspect, and so the plot revolves around the attempts to prove Betty Kane a liar. *Brat Farrar* (1949), meanwhile, involves the impersonation of Patrick Ashby (the heir to the Ashby fortune who has been presumed dead for years) by an American who goes on to discover the truth behind the real Patrick's disappearance. The ingenuity behind Tey's plots means her fiction can be valuable in reading against the conservatism of golden age crime fiction.

Section Two: Textual Analysis

Dorothy L. Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1927)

The central mystery of *Unnatural Death* is the death of a spinster. The elderly Agatha Dawson has been diagnosed with cancer, but her sudden death still arouses the suspicions of her physician Dr Carr. Unable to find an explanation, Dr Carr reluctantly records the

⁶¹ Susan Rowland, 'Tey, Josephine', in *Encyclopaedia of British Women's Writing 1900-1950*, ed. by Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin and Ashlie Sponenberg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 248.

cause of death as heart failure, but is concerned enough to relay his reservations to Wimsey, who begins to investigate the case. During the course of Wimsey's investigation, he encounters a raft of single women: the elderly spinster Agatha; her sister-in-law, Clara Whittaker, whom she lives with for most of her life; Agatha's niece and carer, Mary Whittaker, who is later revealed as her murderer; Mary's devoted friend, Vera Findlater; and the former servants of Agatha, the amusingly named Evelyn and Bertha Gotobed. Also present is Miss Climpson, Wimsey's elderly assistant who often performs much of the fieldwork of his investigations. While not quite a spinster-sleuth, her spinster status is clearly an advantage to Wimsey, as he articulates to his friend, Chief Inspector Parker:

‘Miss Climpson [...] is a manifestation of the wasteful way in which this country is run. [...]. Thousands of old maids, simply bursting with useful energy, are forced by our stupid social system into hydros and hotels and communities and hostels and posts as companions, where their magnificent gossip-powers and units of inquisitiveness are allowed to dissipate themselves or even become harmful to the community, while ratepayers' money is spent on getting work for which these women are providentially fitted, inefficiently carried out by ill-equipped policemen like you’.⁶²

Spinsterhood is defined by its economic position, and the novel highlights the difficulties that the unmarried woman faces in providing for herself without the financial support of a husband. Wimsey's reference to 'old maids' constructs the spinster as an elderly woman who, while certainly not frail or decrepit, is still marginalised. There may be physical spaces to house the spinster – hydros, hotels and hostels – but these are temporary residences, rather than homes; thus the spinster becomes a transient figure. By equating women with units of energy, Wimsey imagines a way for the spinster to assume an active

⁶² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 31. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

role in the nation's economy, rather than be denigrated by it. But the glibness of Wimsey's words and his view of spinsters as a homogenous mass means the text's orientation towards to them remains unclear.

This ambiguity is evident in the conflicting sexual identities afforded the spinster. Wimsey conjures up images of sexually frustrated maids overflowing with unchannelled energy: women who are single but do not want to be. The Victorian old maid, by contrast, was perceived as sexless, but as Laura Doan has pointed out, she was viewed with increasing suspicion after the turn of the century, with sexological discourse emphasising the abnormality of female celibacy.⁶³ Miss Climpson distances herself from any potential transgression by asserting that she is a 'spinster made and not born – a perfectly womanly woman' (p. 186). Miss Climpson positions herself as a surplus woman, rather than an old maid, 'made' a spinster by the war that had killed so many potential husbands. However, her quickness to reiterate her femininity as a 'womanly woman' implies an awareness of anxiety over female inversion during the interwar years. This anxiety is legible in the text's portrayal of Vera Findlater's friendship with Mary Whittaker. Miss Findlater dismisses marriage, proclaiming that she has 'no use for men' and is intent on becoming an 'old maid' (pp. 187-8). Her refusal to enter into a heterosexual relationship raises concerns over the 'pash' that Miss Climpson believes Vera has developed for Mary Whittaker. As Miss Climpson explains to Vera: "I cannot help feeling that it is more natural – more proper, in a sense – for a man and a woman to be all in all to one another than for two persons of the same sex. Er – after all, it is a – a *fruitful* affection"" (p. 191). Miss Climpson claims the heterosexual as both natural and moral because of its

⁶³ Laura Doan, 'Introduction', in *Old Maids To Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 1-16 (p. 4).

reproductive function but, given her own abstinence from the ‘fruitful’ relationships she advocates, her anxiety is both curious and ironic since she reiterates the deviance not only of lesbianism, but also of female celibacy. Her hesitancy, then, perhaps hints at the uncertainty of how the heterosexual desire of the single woman can be expressed legitimately.

Indeed, Susan J. Leonardi has described the text’s attempts to distinguish “‘natural’” from ‘unnatural’, and ‘normal’ from ‘abnormal’ as confusing,⁶⁴ and it appears that this confusion may well stem from the difficulties in distinguishing between female friendship and lesbianism. Miss Climpson appears to read the relationship between Mary Whittaker and Vera Findlater as an example of the latter, as she confides to Wimsey:

‘I must say, I think it rather *unhealthy* – you may remember Miss Clemence Dane’s *very clever book* on the subject? – I have seen so much of that kind of thing in my rather WOMAN-RIDDEN existence! It has such a bad effect, as a rule, upon the *weaker character* of the two [...]’. (pp. 84-5)

The book that Miss Climpson refers to is probably Dane’s *Regiment of Women* (1917).⁶⁵

There is an allusion not only to the eroticisation of female friendships in the early part of the twentieth century, but also to its sinister connotations. Certainly Miss Climpson’s concerns prove justified when Vera Findlater is murdered by Mary Whittaker. Yet, as Leonardi has pointed out, Miss Climpson does not display the same concern over the relationship between Agatha Dawson and her sister-in-law Clara Whittaker. Leonardi reads this as an indicator of Miss Climpson’s unreliability, suggesting that she ‘lacks the

⁶⁴ Susan J. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 64.

⁶⁵ A bestseller of its day, this non-fictional account of a girls school was recently reprinted by Virago as a landmark lesbian text; see Jenny Hartley, ‘Dane, Clemence’, in *Encyclopaedia of British Women’s Writing, 1900-1950*, ed. by Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin and Ashlie Sponenberg (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 63-4.

power to discriminate' and that her 'judgements are not always sound'.⁶⁶ While this may be true, Leonardi's argument overlooks the potential ambiguity of Agatha and Clara's relationship. In reading them as lesbian, Leonardi imposes a model of eroticised friendship. But she fails to acknowledge that the elderly Agatha and Clara belong to a period which viewed women companions as 'Boston marriages', rather than lesbian relationships. They stand in stark contrast to Mary Whittaker, who is clearly a more modern creation:

she was totally out of place among the teatables of St Onesimus. With her handsome, strongly-marked features and quiet air of authority, she was of the type that 'does well' in City offices. (p. 49)

The masculinity of Miss Whittaker marks her out from the spinsters who populate St Onesimus. She is described as not 'the marrying sort' (p. 186) but the implication is that the domestic sphere will not satisfy the ambition of the professional woman. The text hints at a problematic female sexuality, but does so through aligning Mary Whittaker with modernity. The text's inability to decide whether to associate transgressive female sexuality with the modernity that Mary Whittaker invokes, or the tradition that Agatha and Clara gesture back towards, suggests that the narrative is unable to clearly separate boundaries between tradition and modernity, and heterosexual and homosexual desire.

The portrait of Mary Whittaker as the New Woman also complicates the relationship between the urban and the rural spheres. We never actually learn what Mary Whittaker's supposed career is; therefore her status as New Woman becomes simply a means of aligning her with urban modernity, rather than the rural tradition. However, as well as appearing as a world of opportunity, the modern city also offers a space in which

⁶⁶ Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degree*, pp. 65-8.

the deviant can hide:

To the person who has anything to conceal – to the person who wants to lose his identity as one leaf among the leaves of a forest – to the person who asks no more than to pass by and be forgotten, there is one name above others which promises a haven of safety and oblivion. London. Where no one knows his neighbour [...]. Where strangers are friendly and friends are casual. London, whose rather untidy and grubby bosom is the repository of so many odd secrets. Discreet, incurious and all-enfolding London (pp. 200-1)

The metropolitan is aligned with corruption, secrecy and criminality. Indeed, Mary Whittaker takes advantage of the anonymity it offers; she resides in a London flat under the alias of ‘Mrs Forrest’, a secret identity which she can retreat to should her crimes be discovered. The city, then, is used as a further signifier of the single woman’s potential transgressions. The method by which Mary Whittaker murders Agatha Dawson – the deliberate use of a syringe with an air bubble in it that induces an instant (and undetectable) aneurysm – is symbolic of how the modern city conceals transgression. At the same time, the narrative uses rural metaphors to evoke urban dangers – both the city and Mary Whittaker’s alias are ‘forests’ – suggesting that the distinction between the rural and the urban may not be as firm as it would appear.

This allows the text to explore the dynamic between urban modernity and rural tradition. Mary Whittaker’s motive for killing her aunt revolves around a new act soon to be passed through Parliament. Since Agatha Dawson had refused to make a will, the ambiguity of the new Property Act may have meant that Mary Whittaker would not inherit the estate Agatha had informally promised to her. Leonardi argues that in ‘killing Agatha Dawson, Mary does away with the last representative of an older, more genteel and aristocratic world and replaces it with her own hard, businesslike approach to life.’⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees*, p. 71.

This aristocratic world is encapsulated by the country house tradition which, as Alison Light suggests evokes ancestry, tradition and kinship, and which was transformed into the country-house detective novel.⁶⁸ While *Unnatural Death* is not an example of this particular crime narrative, per se, traces of it are evident in the issue of Agatha's shrinking, but still sizeable, estate. The subtext of Leonardi's and Light's argument – which is also at work in the novel itself – is the shift away from the patriarchal and patrilineal economic model underlying the country house tradition. The change in law that the text refers to is not based on gender – it merely changes the understanding of what constitutes an 'issue' to an estate. But the passing of Agatha's estate under the previous law is itself problematic since it would allow Mary Whittaker to legitimately inherit what should have passed to Agatha's son, if she had borne one, effectively positioning Mary as male heir. Yet, at the same time, Agatha's own inheritance of the estate, and the appropriation of it as a domestic space for her and Clara Whittaker, has also undermined the patriarchal structures of country-house tradition. Furthermore, while the change in the Property Act makes Mary's right of inheritance more ambiguous, murdering her Aunt a month before the law delegitimises her claim to the estate by criminalising her. Thus, the issues of inheritance and estate make legible the difficulties in separating sexual transgression and criminal deviance.

The economic and class inflections of the dialogue concerning the single woman and modernity are further evident in the threat that the city poses to young single women, particularly those of the lower classes. The city holds a certain allure for the working-class girl. Selina Todd has described how the post-war years led to changes in for young

⁶⁸ Light, *Forever England*, p. 80.

working women in Britain. Although a substantial number of women continued to work in domestic service, the decrease in household sizes meant that it was in decline and appointments were becoming more difficult to find.⁶⁹ Migration from rural to urban areas in the search for work was becoming more commonplace. Following Agatha Dawson's death, two of her maids, Evelyn and Bertha Gotobed, move to London in an effort to find new work. The girls' landlady there, Mrs Gulliver, describes how Mary Whittaker "filled 'em up so with stories of how fine a place London was and how grand situations was to be had for the asking'" (p. 70). London, then, appears as a city that promises financial gains and occupational mobility, but does not necessarily guarantee the assimilation of the working-class country girl into the more respectable middle classes. Evelyn may meet her future husband at work, and secure a more moneyed situation for herself, but Bertha simply meets a grisly end at the hands of Mary Whittaker. The modern city clearly offers opportunities to the country girl, but the text intimates that her ability to read the city and its dangers may be flawed.

The (hetero)sexual vulnerability of the young working-class girl was an established trope of much romantic and Victorian fiction in the preceding centuries. In the twentieth-century *Unnatural Death*, however, the metropolitan is increasingly used as a metaphor for the dangers of lesbian desire. When Bertha Gotobed is murdered, Wimsey believes that she may have previously lunched with 'Mrs Forrest', and he questions

Evelyn:

'Now, do you think it possible your sister might have been – what shall I say? – got hold of by some woman with a plausible story and all that, and – well –

⁶⁹ Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England, 1918-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

pushed into some position which shocked her very much? Was she cautious and up to the tricks of London people and all that?’ (p. 11)

Whatever we infer from this in regards to the corrupting influence of the metropolitan on women, gaps in the text remain. We are offered nothing more explicit than a vague reference to ‘tricks’, the specifics of which remain unspoken. This indistinctness of meaning occurs again in an exchange between Wimsey and Detective Inspector Parker:

‘I take it you think Bertha Gotobed was inveigled there for some undesirable purpose by Mrs Forrest, and had supper with her – ’
‘No; I should think there was a man.’
‘Yes, of course’ (p. 74)

There is no ‘of course’ about it – the text points towards ‘Mrs Forrest’/Miss Whittaker’s relationship with both Bertha and Miss Findlater as potentially lesbian. Diana Wallace has identified Mary Whittaker as part of a tradition in the interwar years of the predatory lesbian,⁷⁰ and Leonardi seemingly concurs, arguing that ‘she is not content to be herself a spinster, but must recruit innocent young women to this “unnatural state”’.⁷¹ Tellingly, it is Mary Whittaker’s lesbian desire that Leonardi identifies as unnatural in the text, rather than her murderous intentions. The sexually predatory nature of Mary Whittaker is so horrific it cannot be explicitly acknowledged in the text and the two men repress their own interpretations of the situation, unwilling to allow Bertha to exist outside a heterosexual narrative and unable to articulate the extent of Mary Whittaker’s deviance.

Mary Whittaker is equally unable to appropriate heterosexual discourse. During Wimsey’s investigation, he visits ‘Mrs Forrest’ in the hope of uncovering some useful

⁷⁰ This offers a potential affiliation with fictions which I read in relation to middlebrow culture, since Wallace also cites Lehmann’s *Dusty Answer* (1927), Bowen’s *The Hotel* (1927) and Keane’s *Devoted Ladies* (1934). See Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women’s Fiction, 1914-39* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 29.

⁷¹ Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees*, p. 74.

information. When 'Mrs Forrest' indicates a sexual interest in Wimsey he is sceptical, perceiving her as 'essentially sexless' (p. 182). His suspicions appear to have some foundation, but not necessarily in the way he expects:

He pulled her suddenly and violently to him, and kissed her mouth with a practised exaggeration of passion. He knew then. No one who has ever encountered it can ever again mistake that awful shrinking, that uncontrollable revulsion of the flesh against a caress that is nauseous. He thought for a moment she was going to be actually sick. (p. 183)

What Wimsey 'knows' in this encounter is left 'unknown' to the reader. On one hand, Mary Whittaker's reaction could confirm her asexuality; on the other, it could signify her lesbianism. Thus, Wimsey's perception of her as 'sexless', as Leonardi similarly suggests,⁷² could indicate how his own understanding of female sexuality limits it to a heterosexual discourse in which lesbianism becomes invisible. It could equally suggest how heterosexual discourse can conceal lesbianism. The inability to articulate whether the problem of Mary Whittaker is her sexual or her criminal deviance remains at the novel's conclusion. Her crimes are exposed, and she is later trialled for the murders of Miss Findlater and Bertha Gotobed, both characters with whom we suppose she has had lesbian affairs. The lack of evidence concerning her murder of Agatha Dawson, on the other hand, makes it impossible for her to be charged with the offence. Thus, while Mary Whittaker is held accountable for those crimes tied to her sexual transgression, those that are solely criminally transgressive are more difficult to punish. The text suggests that female sexual transgression is coded as criminal, but cannot imagine female criminality separately from sexual transgression.

⁷² Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees*, p. 72.

Ngaio Marsh's *Artists in Crime* (1938)

Marsh's novel, *Artists in Crime*, similarly draws on the connection between problematic female sexuality and criminal deviance, but does so in the context of the country-house murder. During an art class run by Agatha Troy (referred to simply as Troy in the text) the model for the class, Sonia Glück, is murdered. The fact that the crime takes place in the grounds of Troy's home is significant, since it brings criminality within the domestic sphere. But the decline of the country house tradition is not solely signified by this. As a descendant of landed gentry, Troy is part of the upper-middle-class milieu that golden age fiction has been accused of being fixated with, but her inheritance of the house is problematic given her status as a single woman. Furthermore, in running art classes out of her home, Tatler's End, Troy has transformed the country house into a location where the lower-middle-classes can now buy leisure. Yet the extent to which Troy profits from this is debatable, since the text implies her financial situation is precarious. The novel, therefore, suggests the instability of middle-class values and identities at this time.

The instability is even more tangible in the ambiguously gendered Troy. As suggested by her name, Troy cuts an androgynous figure when Inspector Alleyn first meets her:

she wore a pair of exceedingly grubby flannel trousers, and a short grey overall. In her hand was a long brush. Her face was disfigured by a smudge of green paint, and her short hair stood up in a worried shock, as though she had run her hands through it. She was very thin and dark.⁷³

The lack of femininity, combined with her profession as an artist, suggests a bohemian quality to Troy, a quality that is potentially aligned with transgressive sexuality. Her

⁷³ Ngaio Marsh, *Artists in Crime* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1987), p.11. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

friendship with fellow artist Katti Bostock, who stays at Tatler's End, is a further source of anxiety. With her 'Cromwellian' haircut and 'exceedingly heavy eyebrows', Katti is a masculine figure (p. 92), and her protective attitude towards Troy – evident for instance when she demands that the investigating Alleyn leave her weary friend alone (p. 158) – suggests a potentially lesbian undercurrent to their relationship. As Susan Rowland, has argued, however, Troy's relationship with Katti 'does not affect her heterosexual availability'.⁷⁴ She is quickly established as a potential love interest for Inspector Alleyn and subsequently softened in the narrative – the wind blows back her tomboyish hair to reveal 'the contour of the skull and the delicate bones of the face' and the sun catches her paint-smudged skin to give it 'warmth' (p. 14). Although later in the series Troy goes on to marry Alleyn, in this particular text she is not fully reclaimed into heterosexual romance; she has not quite fallen in love with Alleyn, and he is left only allowing himself to 'hope a little' (p. 256). In the case of Troy, the single woman remains on the margins of romance.

The androgynous and ambiguous Troy, however, contrasts with the other single women of the text, particularly Sonia Glück and Valmai Seacliff. Although described as a 'spinster', Sonia is a far cry from the repressed, asexual old maid usually associated with the term, and instead is aligned more closely with the nymphomaniac. Mr Omerin, another artist at the studio, describes her as 'very highly sexed' and 'avid for men' (p. 71). Troy's assertion that Sonia 'fancied herself as a Bohemian siren' (p. 84) is ironic given that, instead of luring men to their death, Sonia herself is murdered as a consequence of her own sexual behaviour. After having sexual relations with Garcia and

⁷⁴ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 164.

Mr Pilgrim, both students in the art class, Sonia falls pregnant, and uses her illegitimate child to blackmail Mr Pilgrim for money in exchange for her silence over their affair. In doing so, female sexual deviance is again aligned with criminality, but this is complicated by Sonia's apparent desire to reinstate herself into heteronormativity, since 'badgering [Garcia] to marry her' would make her child legitimate (p. 251). However, her motives for wanting to marry Garcia remain unclear, and her death means that she is ultimately unable to legitimise either her child or herself.

Her murder is not, however, necessarily attributable to sexual transgression. Susan Rowland has proposed that it is the 'violation of class barriers' in the text that 'leads directly to blackmail and murder'.⁷⁵ The implication throughout the text is that Sonia comes from a working-class background. If this is the case, her affair with Basil Pilgrim becomes suggestive of an attempt at social mobility. In addition, her presence within the art class is symbolic of the potential social disorder resulting from the intrusion of working-class values into middle-class space. The representation of Sonia therefore maintains the association of sexual immorality with the working-class single woman. This could account for the differences in the portrayal of Sonia, and the more obviously middle-class Valmai Seacliff. Valmai is similarly labelled 'a nymphomaniac, and a successful one at that' by Katti (p. 21). Rather than appearing as the victim, though, Valmai is the perpetrator. Sonia is murdered during class while she poses on a wooden bench, re-enacting a scene depicting the murder of a woman by her lover's wife. The method of killing is elaborate: a dagger has been thrust into the bench from underneath and concealed, and the adulterer inadvertently impales his lover onto the spike when he

⁷⁵ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 34.

makes love to her. Garcia plants a real dagger underneath where Sonia will lie, but it is Valmai who, having witnessed Garcia do so, seals Sonia's fate by physically pushing her onto the concealed knife on the pretence that she is helping her into position. The delineation of Sonia as victim and Valmai as murderer requires commentary, since Valmai, like Sonia, is guilty of promiscuity and infidelity, having slept with Garcia while engaged to Basil Pilgrim. Likewise, both are criminally deviant: Valmai not only ensures that Sonia dies, but also kills Garcia. Alleyn's belief that she committed the latter murder because 'she was hell-bent on marrying Pilgrim, and becoming a very rich peeress' (p. 254) suggests that she too desires social mobility. The demarcation between the lower-class and middle-class single woman remains unclear in respect of sexual desire.

What does differentiate the two classes of women in this text is the transgression of normative gender boundaries. Impaling Sonia on the knife resonates with obvious phallic symbolism, and the scene becomes a Freudian spectacle. Valmai's criminal deviance, rather than merely reiterative of class ideologies, is therefore suggestive of a female transgression that is encoded in Freudian models of normative femininity. In the narrative, psychoanalysis is appropriated as a means of identifying motivation. After Sonia has defaced Troy's painting of Valmai Seacliff, Valmai claims that this has arisen out of sexual motives: 'In a way it was rather interesting, a directly sexual jealousy manifesting itself on the symbol of the hated person' (p. 129). But psychoanalytic understandings of problematic sexuality are scorned by Inspector Alleyn, who describes his dislike of 'fatal women', claiming that they 'reek of mass production' (p. 131). Alleyn dismisses this mode of psychology as a contrivance: 'All that psychological clap-trap! She's probably nosed into a *Freud Without Tears* and picked out a few choice phrases'

(p. 131). As the central detective figure, Alleyn has more credibility than the murderous Valmai, and therefore the text as a whole appears ultimately sceptical of psychoanalytic discourse and remains unable to discriminate between sexual transgression and criminal deviance.

Dorothy Bowers' *Fear and Miss Betony* (1941)

Both Peter Wimsey and Roderick Alleyn have problematised the association of the detective figure with masculine reason and order. In *Fear and Miss Betony*, we see another reworking of the detective: the spinster-sleuth. Miss Betony is invited by her friend Grace Aram to join the staff of Makeways, a former nursing home previously known as Martinmas that has been converted into a boarding school for girls. A number of nursing home residents remain at Makeways, and Grace reveals to Miss Betony that traces of poison have been found in the drink in one of them. Although the potential victim, Miss Thurloe, has survived, Grace asks Miss Betony to investigate the attempted murder plot.

As in *Unnatural Death*, spinsterhood is as much an economic position, as it is a category of single woman. The novel opens with Miss Betony seeking accommodation at Toplady Homes, a residential home to which entry costs forty pounds a year.⁷⁶ Although Miss Betony has the requisite funds to meet Toplady entry requirements, her financial status is such that she faces having to ask for parish relief if she does not take up residency at the home. Despite her former occupation as a teacher and governess, Miss Betony is still unable to enjoy financial independence. Miss Betony does not conform to

⁷⁶ Dorothy Bowers, *Fear and Miss Betony* (Boulder: Rue Morgue Press, 2005), p. 3. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

expectations of the elderly spinster though, appearing younger than her sixty-one years and having retained the slim, willowy figure of her youth (p. 3). Nonetheless, the problem of an appropriate domestic space for the unmarried woman is evident. Miss Betony's employment at Makeways on the pretence she is there as a teacher, rather than investigator, provides her with finance and allows her to demonstrate her intellectual usefulness. But the traces of Martinmas (the nursing home for elderly women) that are left at Makeways (the school for young girls) mean that the school is a liminal space, whose function is an oscillating and contradictory one. The ambiguous identity of the school, and its inability to offer Miss Betony a fixed abode, suggests that domestic space for the so-called spinster-sleuth is only borrowed and transitory.

The question of domestic space has certain class inflections in the text. Both Toplady Homes and Martinmas appear as havens for upper-middle class women: Toplady is described as a home for 'gentlewomen' (p. 3), while the former inhabitants of Martinmas are described as 'wealthy hypochondriacs' (p. 39). While these women may have the financial independence that Miss Betony does not, they do not have her mental capabilities. The residents of Toplady Homes are 'decayed' specimens of spinsterhood (p. 3), while the hypochondria that affects the former residents of Martinmas is described as a condition that afflicts the sort of woman 'whose only real complaint is the one she never admits' but which allows the doctors of Martinmas to charge fees for 'coddling the rich who want to be coddled' (p. 39). While these women may have their financial independence, they are weakened, disempowered figures. The matron, Nona Deakin, believes that Miss Thurloe's fear of being poisoned is a sign of her mental incapacity, suggesting 'all these old women who have outlived their prospect span are a bit trembley

in the top-storey' (p. 119). The hypochondriac thus emerges as a symbol of the physical and mental decay of the single woman, symbolising either the trauma inflicted on the surplus women of the First World War or the fate that awaits those who purposefully reject the domestic sphere. But the image of the hypochondriac in this text is a confused one. Miss Thurloe appears as 'a plump yet shrunken figure in a nightgown cluttered with ribbons and lace, tails of limp curly hair hanging about her babyish features, her mouth, wide with fear, the hideous square of Greek tragedy' (p. 63). In Miss Thurloe we see the hysterical spinster, but even in this guise she is a figure of contradictions: childlike, but old; asleep, but awake; the Victorian neurasthenic, but also the mythic remnants of Greek tragedy. Thus, the spinster is a fragmented and incoherent figure.

In a world where the identity of the single woman becomes unstable, the role of the spinster as detective, responsible for restoring for social order, becomes problematic. Certainly, Miss Betony shows the same kind of resourcefulness as Miss Climpson in *Unnatural Death*, but here she more knowingly uses perceptions of the spinster as naturally inquisitive to her advantage. As the novel progresses, Miss Betony begins to suspect that the local fortune-teller, the Great Ambrosio, may be connected to the murder plot. In order to gain information, Miss Betony consciously plays the role of what she dubs the 'Trusting Spinster', manipulating Ambrosio into leaving her unattended in his room while she steals a piece of paper containing what she sees as vital clue (p. 136). As central sleuth, Miss Betony herself must interpret the clue, rather than relay the information as Miss Climpson does. It could be argued that Miss Betony's success as detective is only partial. Her inability to discover what is happening at Makeways early enough means that she fails to prevent the murder of another Martinmas resident, Miss

Wand, who is revealed as having been the real target all along. Miss Betony does eventually discern that Grace Aram is the murderer, and that she killed Miss Wand in order to inherit her sizeable fortune, but only does so after the fact.

Her uncertainty in the role of detective parallels her equally ambiguous role as spinster. On one hand, the text attempts to distance the spinster from sexual deviance. During Miss Betony's time as a schoolteacher, she deliberately cultivates a certain emotional distance from her pupils, discouraging any possibility of a school-girl 'pash'; her letter from Grace is a one-off rather than the indicator of a '*Schwarmerei*' characterised by a 'passionate flow of letters' (p. 18). On the other hand, Miss Betony's status as single woman still places her outside of the patriarchal family unit. Her experience of heterosexual romance also appears problematic, and her work at a 'matrimonial bureau' during the war is labelled an 'indiscretion', over which she harbours feelings of 'disgust' and 'shame' (p. 15). The text, then, intimates that marriage cannot be seen as a straightforward reiteration of socially legitimate heterosexual desire.

This is further explored through the depiction of Emma Betony's aunt, Mary Shagreen. Emma describes how Mary, a dancer in her teens, had 'danced a way through the hearts and purses and capitals of three continents, tripping in and out of wedlock with a charm so sprightly that its unrepentant pace had been forgiven her' (pp. 19-20). Mary appears as a cosmopolitan figure whom marriage has failed to contain. Her transgression is romanticised in the text. A young Grace Aram makes Miss Betony recount the tales of Mary repeatedly to her, indulging in the glitz and glamour that she feels is the privilege of the upper classes, and even Emma secretly covets the life of her aunt whom she loves 'because she was the unacknowledged symbol of what she would have liked to be

herself' (p. 20). Representing the allure of the cosmopolitan, and the class and sexual freedoms it connotes, it is significant that the larger-than-life character of Mary Shagreen enters the text only through the tales of Miss Betony. When Mary finally materialises in the novel, she does so under the alias of Miss Wand. Aware of Miss Wand's true identity and financial position, Grace Aram connives to murder her and inherit her money. The success of Grace's plan should be rife with symbolism: of the potential of the metropolitan to corrupt the single woman, of the vulnerability of the spinster for who even economic self-sufficiency offers no protection. Certainly, the revelation of Grace Aram as a killer aligns the single woman with criminal deviance, and Mary Shagreen stands as a warning to those who would bring the status of marriage as the sphere of heterosexual legitimacy and order into question. But Mary Shagreen also collapses boundaries between the married and the single woman, and her attractiveness prevents the possibility of her standing as a warning of the fate that awaits the sexually transgressive. The narrative may resolve the problem of criminal deviance, but the transgressions of female sexuality remain legible in the shifting and unstable categories of the single woman.

Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948)

The Franchise Affair was based on the real-life eighteenth-century case of Elizabeth Canning, who claimed to have been abducted by two men and held captive by two women in their house.⁷⁷ The enigmatic case is transformed, however, from a whodunit to

⁷⁷ See Sarah Waters, 'The Lost Girl', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/30/sarah-waters-books>> [accessed 15 October 2009] for further details of the case.

a howdunit. Marion Sharpe and her elderly mother are accused by Elizabeth Kane, a fifteen year-old schoolgirl, of kidnapping her, locking her in their attic for a month, and subjecting her to physical assaults. The Sharpe women categorically deny this, and when the matter attracts the attention of the local solicitor, Robert Blair, he decides to pursue the case in order to exonerate the Sharpes. Unlike the other novels examined here, the central crime is not a murder, and so the narrative functions more as a mystery novel. Nonetheless, the text draws on the traditions of the country-house murder. The Sharpes live in a dilapidated house known as The Franchise, situated in Milford, a sleepy village steeped in tradition. As Robert observes, invitations to dinner are ‘still written by hand and sent through the post’.⁷⁸ The Franchise appears as a rather literal symbol of the decline of the country house tradition, incongruous with its surroundings: ‘it had no relation with anything in the countryside [...] The place was irrelevant, as isolated as a child’s toy dropped by the wayside’ (p. 14). The Franchise thus stands as a symbol of the disintegration of the country house tradition in an era of modernity.

The peculiarity of The Franchise is compounded by the strangeness of the Sharpes. Relative newcomers to the village, they are perceived as ‘odd people’ and rumours concerning them already abound (p. 38). Their position as outsiders in the village is emphasised through their construction as foreign. At the start of the novel, Marion is described as a ‘dark woman’ with an accentuated ‘gipsy swarthinness’ (p. 9). When the accusations against the Sharpes are published in a local tabloid, they receive a number of anonymous, abusive letters which refer to them as ‘foreign bitches’ (p. 125). By the time that the trial of the case is impending, and the tabloid newspapers have

⁷⁸ Josephine Tey, *The Franchise Affair* (London: Penguin, 1951), p. 5. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

already concluded that the Sharpes are guilty, the summer sun has darkened Marion's skin, making her look 'more than ever like a gipsy' (p. 161). The foreignness of the Sharpes acts as a physical mark of not only their potential criminal deviance, but also their disruption of the patriarchal family unit. Marion's father committed suicide some years previously, and so it falls to Mrs Sharpe to assume patriarchal authority, with her 'upright and intimidating' face (p. 19). Marion also transgresses conventions of femininity. An androgynous character who plays golf and drives 'a long ball like a man' (p. 15), she distances herself from traditionally feminine qualities. She claims to 'loathe domesticity' (p. 35) and dismisses the prospect of integrating herself into a patriarchal family unit, declaring 'I am *not* a marrying woman' (p. 20).

There appears an opportunity to temper the transgressiveness of Marion Sharpe in the form of Robert Blair, who perceives Marion as a potential love interest. Alison Light highlights the difficulties inherent in positioning Marion in a heterosexual romance plot, and suggests that the possibility of marrying Marion off to Robert Blair would present 'very real structural problems for Tey since the attraction depends on Marion's "difference"'.⁷⁹ While this is certainly true, the romantic potential of their relationship is also problematic because of Robert's role as the central sleuth of the story. The amateur detective in golden age fiction usually becomes part of a typically upper-middle-class 'society that maintains the social order through self-surveillance'.⁸⁰ While the detective figure in *The Franchise Affair* is part of this enclosed upper-middle-class society, the accused are not. Although their ownership of the Franchise marks them as wealthy, the

⁷⁹ Alison Light, 'Writing Fictions: Femininity and the 1950s', in *The Progress of Romance*, ed. by Jean Radford (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 139-65 (p. 158).

⁸⁰ Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, p. 46.

Sharpes are outsiders in Milford; even the discovery of their innocence does not create a space for them in the village and they decide to migrate to Canada. It is Marion's (and her mother's) 'difference' that draws Robert into acting as detective in the first place, yet in solving the crime, Robert closes down the transgression of Marion by breaking the alignment of sexual deviance with criminal deviance. At the same time, Marion's refusal to marry Robert still marks her with sexual ambiguity. Thus, the narrative itself becomes caught in a loop of transgression from which it seemingly cannot escape.

This has obvious implications for the function of the crime narrative itself, especially given its role in restoring and reiterating social order. It also impacts on the class inflections of the text. The exoneration of the Sharpes comes at the cost of exposing Betty Kane as a liar. When the police initially bring Betty to the Franchise house to identify the Sharpes as the women who detained and assaulted her, Mrs Sharpe openly asks the police if the girl is still a virgin, arguing that '[i]f I had been missing a month from my house it is the first thing that my mother would have wanted to know about me' (p. 28). The assumption that an investigation of the accuser's sexual behaviour is required to discredit her suggests that a lack of sexual continence is synonymous with either mental instability or deceitfulness. It falls to Robert to disprove Betty's supposed virtue, and he does this not only by interrogating her sexual morality, but also her class status. It emerges that Betty is a working-class 'war orphan', evacuated to the Wynn family when the war began and later adopted by them after her parents were killed. Her biological family are hardly a model example— a newsagent who knew the family describes Mrs Kane as both 'a bad mother and a bad wife' (p. 79). It is suggested that the urban sphere holds a powerful allure for Mrs Kane, when the newsagent claims that Betty's mother

refused to be evacuated with her daughter because ‘[t]hree days of the country would kill her’, and instead continued to enjoy the freedoms of the city, drinking and spending her nights dancing with officers (p. 79). Light concludes that Betty’s mother is the real villain of the novel, having passed her nymphomania along to her daughter through her working-class blood.⁸¹ She astutely observes that the Sharpes’ ‘triumph and the process of their embourgeoisment (however partial) can only be achieved at the expense of the young girl’s degradation: displaced into the working classes, she can be fully condemned as sexually deviant’.⁸² At the heart of Light’s argument is the belief that the text perpetuates the association of sexual immorality with the working-class girl.

While this association is certainly evident, Light does not fully investigate how the text plays with this relationship. Light’s argument suggests that sexual immorality is presented in the novel as part of working-class biology, a hereditary taint that can be passed from mother to daughter. However, the narrative also invokes the image of the corrupting city, and the question of whether London life has influenced the sexual behaviour of Mrs Kane or whether she simply enjoys it because of her innate sexual transgression is unanswered. Furthermore, the supposed reabsorption of the Sharpes into bourgeois ideals of femininity – even if Light does acknowledge this as only partial – positions the text as part of the conservative, golden age tradition. Marion’s refusal to marry Robert is ‘in line with a femininity founded on duty and self-sacrifice’ for Light, since Marion’s ‘autonomy is bought at the price of sexual experience and desire, her protest against marriage and domesticity at the cost of her sexual needs’.⁸³ Waters also

⁸¹ Light, ‘Writing Fictions’, p. 156.

⁸² Light, ‘Writing Fictions’, p. 151.

⁸³ Light, ‘Writing Fictions’, p. 159.

focuses on the supposed anxieties over the bourgeoisie in the text, describing how the novel enacts ‘post-war British middle-class panic’, and in doing so, ‘proves the cynical middle-class characters right’.⁸⁴ Yet Marion does not appear to particularly desire to marry Robert, and her eagerness to leave *The Franchise* even after her name has been cleared suggests she has no interest in the bourgeois values it invokes. The lack of due weight Light and Waters give to how *The Franchise Affair* subverts the conventions of the whodunit, the country-house murder and the detective story, obscures how the text challenges conservative reiterations of bourgeois values.

Both Light and Waters emphasise Betty Kane as a scapegoat for nervousness concerning the single woman. As Waters observes, Betty is ‘an inflammatory figure because she’s such a powerful meeting point for anxieties about gender, sexuality and class’.⁸⁵ Betty acts as a cipher for the new freedoms available to the working-class single girl. She disappears while returning from a holiday with her aunt, during which she spent most of her time in ‘unsupervised freedom’ on the streets of the nearby town of Larborough (p. 49). The owner of a local teashop describes to Robert how Betty had ‘picked up’ an older, male customer (p. 85). Robert later discovers that during the time Betty had claimed to be in the Sharpes’ attic, she had been posing as the wife of a young wholesale worker, Bernard Chadwick, in a hotel in Copenhagen. The cosmopolitan landscape provides anonymity for Betty and her lover, but cannot conceal her transgression. The hotel manager’s description of Betty metaphorically equates her with masculine sexual avarice: “‘Mrs Chadwick was eating like a young wolf at my hotel’” (p.

⁸⁴ Waters, ‘The Lost Girl’.

⁸⁵ Waters, ‘The Lost Girl’.

216). This is in direct contrast to the real Mrs Chadwick's perception of Betty, as she describes her discovery of her husband's affair:

‘I went in and found her lying in the bed in the kind of negligee you used to see in vamp films about ten years ago [...] She was eating chocolates out of an enormous box that was lying on the bed alongside her. Terribly nineteen-thirty, the whole set up’ (p. 244)

The image of Betty here constructs her as excessively feminine, rather than masculine, meaning the depiction of Betty's sexuality is confused and conflicting. More significantly, it is contrived instead of innate, inspired by cultural myth as much as anything else. It is all the more disturbing because of Betty's age: it is important to remember that she is still only fifteen years old. Waters' observation that Betty is a 'dangerously liminal creature' is true, but examination of *The Franchise Affair* has not always taken into account how Betty's age is a crucial factor alongside her gender and social standing.⁸⁶ Rather than embodying transgressive female sexuality, Betty appears to imitate it. She stands as a symbol of not just how class delineates sexual transgression, nor how the urban, cosmopolitan world grants her the opportunity to indulge in this transgression, but also of how unstable representations of normative and non-normative sexuality are, constructed as they are through a range of discourses.

Conclusions

Critics of British golden age crime fiction have repeatedly pointed to a tempering of the masculine, heroic detective figure as part of an effort to understand shifts in the development of the genre. The texts discussed here are certainly characterised by these shifts, particularly in their depiction of the detective figure. Although Marsh's Alleyn is

⁸⁶ Waters, 'The lost girl'.

still a professional, his aristocratic status and involvement in a romance narrative with Troy points to more moderate masculinity. Sayers' Wimsey is rather more foppish and clearly positioned outside the professional structures of the law. The police presence in *The Franchise Affair* takes a back seat when the investigation is led by the local solicitor Robert Blair. *Fear and Miss Betony* uses a spinster-sleuth to signal a more feminised approach, by allowing Miss Betony to use her position as spinster as a means of information-gathering.

This reworking of the detective figure is symptomatic of a broader questioning in these texts of both masculine and feminine paradigms. The presence of transgressive female sexuality in these texts, in particular, has been subject to some scrutiny in criticism, but the differing and often contradictory forms that this appears in have not been made explicit enough. The taxonomy of the 'single woman' encapsulates many of these sexual transgressions. Crime fiction of this period was often heavily populated by stereotypes of singlehood: nymphomaniacs, spinsters, lesbians. The conventions of the genre mean that the single woman's sexual deviance can be aligned with criminal deviance, but the problematic delineation of categories of single women simultaneously undermines that connection. The nymphomaniac occurs in the figures of Sonia Glück and Valmai Seacliff in *Artists in Crime* – and the murder and imprisonment, respectively, of these women is a crude and literal way of removing the threat they pose to the heterosexual order. But the nymphomaniac becomes a rather confused identity in fictions of this time. In Tey's *The Franchise Affair* the qualities of the nymphomaniac appear in Betty Kane: as she is a schoolgirl the portrayal is disturbing. Her sexual identity becomes one of posturing and, as a spectacle of an earlier decade, an outdated posturing at that.

The artificiality of such images is also emphasised in Marsh's fictions. Valmai Seacliff attempts to portray herself as a man-eater signal a deliberate effort to appropriate images of aberrant sexuality from psychoanalytic discourse. The text's suspicion of psychoanalysis undermines the stability of those Freudian conceptions of sexual identity, and seemingly calls into question the reliability of psychoanalysis to signal sexual deviance.

In contrast to the nymphomaniac is the more androgynous single woman, who seemingly abstains from heterosexual romance. Both Troy in *Artists in Crime* and Miss Whittaker in *Unnatural Death* are given if not a masculinised, at least a de-feminised identity which is recognized through a problematic relationship with the domestic sphere. Troy is initially implicated in a bohemian lifestyle which is at odds with the domestic, but her position within a potential romance narrative allows her a foothold in the heterosexual order, even if it means Alleyn transgresses his role as detective figure. The portrayal of Miss Whittaker is more problematic. The narrative voices concern over the potentially homoerotic friendships Miss Whittaker has with Miss Findlater and Bertha Gotobed, revealing an anxiety about the threat which female friendships posed to the single woman's absorption into the heteronormative order through marriage. The motif of the 'passionate friendship' is here associated with an androgynous woman whose lesbian identity remains at the level of subtext – the revulsion of 'Mrs Forrest' at heterosexual desire cannot be understood in lesbian terms by Wimsey; instead she becomes 'sexless' and lesbian desire is erased in the heteronormative order.

Contrasting these figures is the spinster, or surplus woman: a figure who desires entry to the heteronormative order, but has been denied it by war. Crime fiction does

initially offer the spinster the chance of being reabsorbed into this order by allotting her a role in sustaining it. Both Miss Climpson and Miss Betony are representative of this figure, but their position in these crime narratives is ambiguous. Miss Climpson's knowingness about lesbian sexuality signals her as a more modern single woman than her spinster identity suggests, and Miss Betony's role in restoring order remains problematic. Nevertheless, their apparent usefulness in detection does at least allow them to earn their protection from a heterosexual economy that deems the unmarried woman to be economically unsustainable. The wealthy spinster (like Agatha in *Unnatural Death* and Mary Shagreen/'Miss Wand' in *Fear and Miss Betony*) is vulnerable to attack from those seeking to inherit her estate and/or being labelled a hypochondriac (like the women of Martinmas in *Fear and Miss Betony*) since she does not have the option of being reabsorbed into the domestic or professional arenas. Now no longer sexually attractive or capable of sustaining employment, she becomes disempowered. Mary Whittaker is a hyperbolic representation of the desperation of the ageing unmarried woman: committing a crime in order to sustain herself. Although Miss Whittaker adopts the disguise of the New Woman, she is not one: her means of obtaining economic independence is through the murder of her aunt. Similarly, Grace Aram attempts to elevate herself from the role of the working woman by killing Mary Shagreen/'Miss Wand' for financial gain.

In this sense, then, female criminality becomes aligned with social mobility, but it is mobility that itself is bound up in the pull between the rural and class traditions of the past, and the urban and class aspirations of modernity. Ironically, Mary Whittaker's inheritance is actually dependent on the existence of primogeniture: without it, under the new property law, she would stand to inherit nothing. Mary manipulates the heterosexual

economy, killing Agatha while she is still guaranteed to inherit her estate. Grace Aram, meanwhile, attempts to borrow the cosmopolitan, upper-middle-class lifestyle she craves by stealing Mary Shagreen's fortune. Thus, the modern, urban sphere becomes the realm of both the corrupted and the corruptible. The working-class girl is seemingly doomed to stay associated with sexual immorality (like Betty Kane), become a victim of another's sexual immorality (like Bertha Gotobed), or both (as in the case of Sonia Glück). In British golden age crime fiction, these tensions between tradition and modernity, between normative and deviant sexuality, are often encoded in the context of the country-house tradition. Although the plot of *The Franchise Affair* works to dispel Betty Kane's accusations against the Sharpes, there remains room for both sexual and criminal suspicion of them because of their occupation of the dilapidated Franchise, itself a signifier of the erosion of the patrilineally-acquired country house. Their vulnerability to accusations like Betty Kane's suggests an anxiety over the single woman outside of the domestic sphere in a post-primogeniture economy. If the single woman does not belong to the domestic or the professional, then how can she be regulated or legitimately participate in the economy of heterosexual order?

The anxiety concerning class, gender and sexuality that the single woman encompasses can be contextualised by the debates concerning the delineation of the rural and urban, and the traditional and the modern. Accordingly, golden age crime fiction is especially valuable in the discussion of cultural hierarchies because the form has largely been associated with rural traditions rather than urban modernity. The sub-narratives of the texts discussed here are the same as those that Nicola Humble argues have been traditionally associated with feminine middlebrow fiction: romance, the country-house

novel, the domestic narrative. It perhaps follows, then, that golden age has been read as conservative for the same reasons as the middlebrow has. The ambiguities of the single woman, and her resistance to straightforward alignment with the opposing ideologies informing middlebrow and modernist culture, means that the perceived conservatism of golden age crime fiction can be challenged, and I present here it as an exemplar of the tensions that inform both those cultural hierarchies and representations of the single woman.

Chapter Four

‘Betwixt and Between’?: The Single Woman and the Middlebrow

The middlebrow has traditionally occupied a problematic position within discussions of cultural hierarchies. Middlebrow has been described by Janice A. Radway as a form that ‘self-consciously appropriated the value of “Culture” and “the serious”’ and mobilised ‘those concepts and the objects that embodied them with new, highly suspect uses’.¹

These suspicions largely centred on the perceived aspirations of middlebrow culture and its supposed attempts to appropriate highbrow elements as means of acquiring cultural capital and thus secure class mobility. As Mary Grover has observed, debates concerning middlebrow cultures in interwar England were ‘characterized by [a] focus on drawing the boundaries against individuals or classes that most nearly threatened the authority of one’s own’.² According to Grover, this anxiety was more pronounced in Britain than America during the interwar years, partly because of the differing class structures of the two countries, but also because ‘much of the aggressive British rhetoric toward mass culture in general focused on the perceived Americanisation of British culture’.³ Grover’s study, then, suggests that the middlebrow was not a straightforward reiteration of middle-class values, but a more complex site of class delineation that varied according to national context.

The complexity of the middlebrow is signalled by the range of ways in which the term has been deployed. Discussions of cultural hierarchies have used ‘middlebrow’ to describe taste, audience, readership, authorships, books and other cultural products. One

¹ Janice A. Radway, ‘The Scandal of the Middlebrow: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Class Fracture and Cultural Authority’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89.4 (1990), 704-32 (p. 726).

² Mary Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p.41.

³ Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping*, p. 36.

of the most important formative studies of the middlebrow in relation to literature was Q. D. Leavis' *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). Leavis' work was an attack on the reading tastes of the middle classes, and their inability to intellectually respond to, and thus discriminate among, fictions. Although Leavis' work appears preoccupied with middlebrow readerships and authorships, her study is significant because of its attempts to demarcate between different kinds of fiction according to taste and literary value. For example, she equates the bestseller with the lowbrow, and suggests that 'the general reading public of the twentieth century is no longer in touch with the best literature of its own day or of the past'.⁴ Leavis touches on the aesthetics of the middlebrow – the 'best literature' not only encompasses ideologies of audiences, but also hints at the form and content of the fiction itself. The pejorative connotations of middlebrow may be as much about aesthetics as they are about authors or readers, but Leavis' argument points to how these significations are bound up with ideologies of literary taste, class and cultural capital, and cannot easily be separated from one another.

Leavis' study, and the fictions and reading public that she examines, could account for how middlebrow became a by-word for a particular type of author whose work belonged to and reflected on middle-class culture and which adhered to largely realist forms, while attempting to appropriate modern subjects associated with more highbrow culture. Since Leavis' account, the middlebrow author has not only been gendered feminine, but also female. In her study of Rosamond Lehmann, Wendy Pollard observes that Lehmann has often been discussed in comparison to other contemporary women writers in a range of gender-specific studies, and she cites this as a general trend

⁴ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 235.

in literary criticism from which ‘it has been a further short step to categorise the works of women variously described as “literary”, “serious”, but also frequently “middlebrow” novelists under the blanket term, “the woman’s novel”’.⁵ Pollard uses Clare Hanson’s discussion of the woman’s novel in *Hysterical Fictions* to illustrate how this has been the case.⁶ Hanson draws on the theories of Hilary Radner, who argued the woman’s novel ‘confounds the distinctions between [two] different regimes of reading’: the obsessional (reading in order to master the text) and the hysterical (whereby the reader takes pleasure in the process of reading itself).⁷ For Radner, these different ways of reading emerge because the woman’s novel is written for middle-class readers by middle-class writers. These writers, as Radner argues, are conflicted between the ‘intellect’ and their ‘feminine’ identities constructed in relation to the family unit. Broadly speaking, then, the woman’s novel is seen as a point of tension between traditional divisions of masculine intellectual activity and feminine domestic passivity.

Hanson emphasises that Radner’s argument is indicative of the gendered construction of the mind-body that has been a constituent of Western philosophical discourse. She suggests that:

the problematic of female embodiment is at the very heart of [the woman’s novel] [...]. [T]he women writers considered here are engaged in a double manoeuvre. On the one hand they must resist the symbolic distribution of functions whereby the mind and spirit are ascribed to man while woman is identified with the body (and matter and death). They must claim their right to intellectual and spiritual identity. However, they must also ‘defend’ that which has been identified with the feminine, if they are not simply to replicate a masculine subject position.

⁵ Wendy Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception* (Aldergate: Ashgate, 2004), p. 21.

⁶ Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The Woman’s Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

⁷ Hilary Radner, ‘Extra-Curricular Activities: Women Writers and the Readerly Text’, in *Women’s Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 251-67 (p. 252).

Characteristically, then, they interrogate the identification of the intellect solely with the masculine, but also explore the positive aspects of a (female) subject position tied closely to embodiment.⁸

Hanson reads the woman's novel as a renegotiation of femininity, tracking the way in which the mind-body divide can be reconciled. Hanson's reading offers a way of rescuing femininity from its derogatory standing, but it is problematic for this study. Although Hanson rejects accusations of essentialism, she nonetheless implies that the woman's novel is a category defined not only by its content, but also its authorship and readership. Furthermore, she largely ignores the class and gender implications of reading the woman's novel as middlebrow, and does not reflect on the middlebrow itself. For Hanson, as for Radner and Beauman before her, the middlebrow signifies the concerns of middle-class women and their understanding of middle-class femininity. The term is therefore unproblematically deployed to signify that which is female and feminine, and its flexibility and expansiveness as a cultural category is not recognised.

The synonymy of the middlebrow with the women's novel has perhaps contributed to the delineation of the middlebrow as a specific form of fiction. One of the most sustained and groundbreaking accounts of this is Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*. Humble's study is one of the first that attempts to rescue the middlebrow from its derogatory status, and instead 'rehabilitate both the term and the body of literature to which it was generally applied in the four decades from the 1920s to the 1950s'.⁹ One of the key ways in which she does this is by using the term 'feminine' as a qualifier, rather than a constant. For Humble, it is not the femaleness of a book's author

⁸ Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions*, p. 16.

⁹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1.

that makes a text middlebrow; instead, the ‘particular concentration on feminine aspects of life, a fascination with domestic space, a concern with courtship and marriage, a preoccupation with aspects of class and manner’ marks the tradition of the ‘feminine middlebrow’.¹⁰ This, of course, raises questions concerning the assignment of feminine qualities to the domestic and the romantic. In doing so, it also points towards why fiction identified as middlebrow has been read as conservative. Humble argues that middlebrow fiction is a ‘hybrid’ form that draws on conventions not only from romance and domestic fiction, but also from the country house tradition.¹¹ These narratives function on the premise of rigid class structures and clearly demarcated male and female spheres. The country-house novel depicted an upper-class mode of living that subsumed women in marriage in order to maintain patrilineal lines of inheritance. Meanwhile, romance plots, as Bridget Fowler observes:

explore[d] conflicts over both the subordination of women in patriarchal relations and the modern channelling of intense emotional ties into the confined, privatised sphere of the family. They celebrate[d] heterosexual monogamous relations.¹²

In Fowler’s study, domestic romance is traced back to patriarchal feudalism, a tradition that binds romance with marriage and the commoditisation of women, and reiterates class boundaries.¹³ These various narratives, then, share a heteronormative ideology that reinscribes traditional gender significations and class boundaries.

The revival of interest in the middlebrow has been, in part, fostered by a reconsideration of how brow boundaries are demarcated. The reconfiguring of the

¹⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 11.

¹¹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 4.

¹² Bridget Fowler, *The Alienated Reader: Women and Popular Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 8.

¹³ Fowler, *The Alienated Reader*, p. 7.

relationship between high and low culture has meant that the category of the middlebrow has been interrogated anew. Consequently, the gender and class identity of the middlebrow has also been re-evaluated. Humble's study marks the genesis of this by suggesting that the feminine middlebrow 'was a powerful force in establishing and consolidating, but also in resisting, new class and gender identities, and that it is its paradoxical allegiance to both domesticity and radical sophistication that makes this literary form so ideologically flexible'.¹⁴ In some aspects, my own work is indebted to Humble's study because I, too, investigate the inherent tensions of the middlebrow. However, it also differs in one important respect. Humble's most fundamental argument is that middlebrow can be used to describe a particular type of fiction, rather than a mode of authorship or a reading public. The impetus behind this may well be to counteract what Humble astutely observes as the general reluctance to use the term middlebrow when describing fiction because of its pejorative connotations. I use the term middlebrow more tentatively. Rather than arguing it can describe a certain fiction, I suggest that the term signifies certain assumptions about texts, particularly concerning their traditionalism or conservatism. Furthermore, close textual analysis reveals how fictions usually associated with the middlebrow are often marked by a much more ambiguous ideology that is caught between established traditions and an alluring, but dangerous, modernity. In doing so, I hope to move away from notions of literary value and reading taste, and instead use sociohistorical contexts to inform my readings.

Accordingly, Humble's study is invaluable in providing a framework of tropes and conventions that have been deemed middlebrow. Against this backdrop, I use the

¹⁴ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow*, p. 3.

figure of the single woman as a means of illuminating the tensions expressed in those tropes and conventions. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the single woman encapsulates anxieties concerning the balance between tradition and modernity. While a number of critics such as Laura Doan, Diana Wallace and Deborah Parsons have discussed the different forms of transgressive female sexuality in fiction from the first part of the twentieth century, none has offered any sustained analysis of this in specific relation to middlebrow culture.¹⁵ There remains, then, room to further enhance our understanding of transgressive female sexuality from the 1920s to the 1940s in relation to cultural hierarchy.

Analysis of the single woman can also allow for a more radical reading of the various narratives that Humble argues compose middlebrow fiction, particularly romance. Some of the female authors I include in this chapter – most notably Rosamond Lehmann – have been deleteriously labelled ‘feminine’ because of their supposed preoccupation with love. Like the middlebrow, modern romance has been read as a form of popular fiction, has had its literary value questioned, and has been associated with ‘feminine sensibility’.¹⁶ And, again, like the middlebrow, romance scholarship has recently sought to challenge these assumptions about the genre. The approach to this has been largely

¹⁵ These studies have not necessarily confined themselves to an explicit consideration of texts as middlebrow, but have looked at novels which have employed the mainly realist techniques that have come to be associated with middlebrow fiction, and have been discussed in other studies of the feminine middlebrow especially. Laura Doan, Maroula Joannou and Diana Wallace have all addressed the depiction of the spinster: Doan and Wallace have discussed lesbianism in a selection of women’s fiction, and Deborah Parsons has tracked the female reimagining of the flâneur in several authors previously categorised as middlebrow, such as Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen. See Laura Doan, ed., *Old Maids To Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Maroula Joannou, *Ladies, Please Don’t Smash These Windows: Women’s Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change, 1918-1938* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women’s Fiction, 1914-39* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

¹⁶ This is the term that Pollard argues has been used in reviews and discussions of Rosamond Lehmann.

sociological: Janice Radway, for example, has analysed romance readership,¹⁷ and Rachel Blau DuPlessis appropriates the sociological term ‘script’ to suggest that romance narratives function as an ‘insistence of strongly mandated patterns of learned behaviour that are culturally and historically specific’, behaviour which is patriarchal and heterosexual.¹⁸ However, there has also been some consideration of narrative strategies. DuPlessis argues that writers such as Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and H. D. used narrative experimentation – what she terms ‘writing beyond the ending’ – to ‘den[y] [...] or reconstruct [...] seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically passed’ and so revise the romance plot.¹⁹ While DuPlessis uses modernist writers as examples, I argue that further examination of supposed middlebrow texts reveal similar narrative experimentation to produce the same effect. Instead of arguing that the middlebrow appropriates high cultural forms to misleadingly present itself as ‘serious’ literature’, I propose that it uses narrative experiment in a similar way to modernism – that is, to signal the ambivalences and ambiguities of transgressive female sexuality. The single woman’s problematic relationship with heterosexual scripts makes her especially useful in exploring this.

I suggest that the heterosexual scripts are further complicated by the girls’ school story, a sub-genre that potentially can be subsumed into the tradition of children’s literature or the adolescent bildungsroman – two of the narratives that Humble identifies as composing middlebrow fiction. The girls’ school story had emerged in the late

¹⁷ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 2.

¹⁹ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, p. 5

Victorian period, but was cemented as a form by Angela Brazil in the 1910s. It was initially seen as a blend of didacticism and entertainment, but underwent changes in the interwar years because of its depictions of close female friendships. As models of female friendships became increasingly eroticised, anxiety about the girls' school increased. Alison Oram and Annemarie Turnbull suggest that nervousness over potentially lesbian feelings in young girls 'can be identified from at least the late-nineteenth century' and attributes this to 'the developing medical discourse about sexuality, evident by the 1920s' which led to 'the sexualisation of girls' adolescence'.²⁰ They further argue that from the 1930s, 'descriptions of intense feelings between women fade, to be replaced by greater emphasis on heterosexuality and marriage'.²¹ Consequently, potentially romantic friendships between girls are replaced by heterosexual scripts. The echo of the girls' school story in the adult fictions of supposed middlebrow authors, as evident in their exploration of adolescent sexuality, offer an opportunity to expand the category of the single woman herself, in ways which further illuminate her ambiguities.

The subgenre also points to the importance of environment in the fictions that I examine. This is of particular relevance to the debates concerning the rural and urban spheres that often formed part of a wider dialogue about tradition and modernity. Faye Hammill has noted that in apparently middlebrow texts, the 'privileging of the metropolitan exists [...] in tension with the contemporary urge toward the simple life, and the pastoral fantasies which resulted'.²² Mary Grover concurs, asserting that in Britain the

²⁰ Alison Oram and Annemarie Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex Between Women in Britain from 1780-1970* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 129-30.

²¹ Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p. 132.

²² Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 8.

‘geographical metaphors which characterise this debate [concerning the value of the middlebrow] are nearly all rooted in London’s urban landscape and the countryside of the home counties’, before further arguing that the ‘concepts of the middlebrow and the suburban are never far apart’.²³ In Hammill and Grover’s analyses, the suburbs work metaphorically as a contested space in which the urban and rural spheres meet. Lynne Hapgood has suggested, however, that for the Edwardians at least, ‘[r]ural England belonged in the past’ and ‘the suburb was site of reconciliation, where the rural could be re-imagined and reinterpreted’.²⁴ It might therefore be possible that the tensions of middlebrow culture mean that the suburbs cannot function as the idyll the Edwardians had imagined. Hammill intimates something similar in her analysis of Stella Gibbons and the suburbs, where she argues ‘the class identity of the suburb was [...] neither stable nor clearly defined’ and counters the notion that ‘suburban culture is unchallenging, intelligible, homogenous and highly conventional’.²⁵ The significations of the suburban itself, then, are destabilised and consequently the suburbs become a more spectral presence in fictions associated with the middlebrow. By contrast, the tangibility of the rural and urban in many of the texts I have chosen means that these spheres can be more rigorously interrogated as part of the ongoing reassessment of the binary oppositions within middlebrow culture.

Not all of the novels I have selected offer the opportunity to explore all of these tensions at once. Nonetheless, they do each contribute to the dialogue over what

²³ Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping*, p. 40.

²⁴ Lynne Hapgood, *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction and Culture, 1880-1925* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2005), pp. 7-8.

²⁵ Faye Hammill, ‘Stella Gibbons, Ex-Centricity and the Suburb’, in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. by Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 75-92 (pp. 75-8).

middlebrow is taken to signify when applied to literary texts. The ambiguous sexuality of the single woman is especially prevalent in them. In several, the central characters are involved in potentially lesbian relationships: for example, Sydney in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927) and Jane in Molly Keane's *Devoted Ladies* (1924). Yet these women are not assigned exclusively lesbian identities; both Sydney and Jane also have male love interests. The transgressive role that lesbian desire plays in these fictions is indicative of uncertainty over the position of the single woman within the heterosexual framework that itself was undergoing some radical changes. Even in novels where the single woman is distanced from a lesbian identity – such as Olivia Curtis in *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) – she is not fully aligned with a traditional female role, instead occupying a space on the margins of heterosexual order. Much of the fiction of the interwar years follows the single woman's negotiation of her place within this order. Eliot Bliss's *Saraband* (1931) follows Louie Burnett from adolescence to adulthood, exploring how she attempts to reconcile her feelings for Tim with her reluctance to marry, while Antonia White's *Frost in May* (1933) depicts its young heroine Nanda Grey growing up in a Catholic convent that prohibits the expression of both homosexual and heterosexual female desire.

I have tried to be as diverse as possible in selecting novels by neglected writers not normally examined within the context of middlebrow alongside more well-known authors. *Saraband* has been almost entirely neglected in recent studies of women's writing during the period, and Bliss herself has been a largely overlooked author; even the reissuing of *Saraband* and *Luminous Isle* (1936) by Virago during the 1980s failed to revive any significant scholarly interest in her works. Studies of Molly Keane have also been relatively scarce, and what criticism there is has tended to situate her within an

Anglo-Irish milieu. Most of her fictions are set in the archetypal Big Houses of Ireland; significantly, *Devoted Ladies*, although partly set in rural Ireland, begins with a more metropolitan and bohemian backdrop, making it more relevant to my exploration of middlebrow culture. While discussion of Bowen's work has likewise tended to focus on the Anglo-Irish context of her fiction, criticism on her has been much more varied and intellectually robust, often pointing to the modernist qualities of her work. Although *The Hotel* has been the subject of some perceptive studies by Maud Ellmann and Patricia Coughlan²⁶ that have focused on female desire in the text, as Bowen's first novel it is often considered as a developmental work; when read alongside these other texts, however, its contribution to the debates concerning the single woman becomes clear. *The Weather in the Streets* has been more traditionally viewed as middlebrow, probably because of Lehmann's reputation as a romance writer; an illumination of the way in which the text problematises romantic conventions, particularly in its exploration of adultery and abortion, allows for a reassessment of it. *Frost in May* is probably Antonia White's most popular novel, and criticism on it has focused on the passionate female friendships that dominate the novel, positioning it as part of the girls' school tradition. There have been relatively few comparative studies of it with texts often considered middlebrow.

Although I primarily consider these works in the context of middlebrow culture, it should be remembered that I do so partly as a means of reconsidering distinctions between the middlebrow and modernism, and pointing towards the flexibility of these

²⁶ Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) and Patricia Coughlan, 'Women and Desire in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen', in *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. by Éibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), pp. 103-34.

cultural categories. For example, despite the wide range of texts she discusses, Humble makes no reference to the works of Bliss and Keane, although they have much in common with authors who have been labelled middlebrow. At the same time, Humble observes how there have been revisionist exercises of late, aimed at reclaiming middlebrow writers such as Bowen and White as modernist, but proposes that this should be resisted in the interest of ‘retaining the sense of cultural boundaries that dominated contemporary thinking about literature’.²⁷ The opposite approach involves presenting particular authors as exemplars of middlebrow culture and thus inscribing them with a particular literary worth or value. This might obscure previously unrecognised stylistic experimentation or neglected textual nuances. Although I present entries on individual authors below, I have adopted a different method by arguing that what connects the texts that I have selected is the ways in which the single women depicted in them are caught between opposing ideologies of gender, class and environment. Sustained, comparative analysis of these novels can illuminate why they may have been associated with middlebrow culture, but simultaneously begins to question the view that they are an essential part or exemplary of that culture by emphasising the fluidity of brow boundaries.

Section One: Authors

Elizabeth Bowen (1899 – 1973)

In the foreword to her 1977 biography of Elizabeth Bowen, Victoria Glendinning asks:

Why a life of Elizabeth Bowen? [...]. It is too soon to assess precisely her place among twentieth-century novelists; at this close remove her position is a little

²⁷ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow*, pp. 24-5.

obscured by the established reputations of writers who preceded her and the impact of contemporary writing. But she is a major writer; her name should appear in any responsible list of the ten most important writers in English on this side of the Atlantic in this century.²⁸

Glendinning's reflections on Bowen's reputation point to a debate concerning her then literary value. Glendinning certainly leaves no doubt as to her opinion of her work, avoiding the reading of Bowen as a 'woman writer' and instead emphasising her contribution to twentieth-century writing. That Glendinning ultimately remains preoccupied with Bowen's life, rather than her work, does little in itself to position Bowen as worthy of considered critical discussion. In her lifetime, Bowen remained something of a marginalised figure in literary culture; although her fiction sold moderately well, it was decried by writers such as Anthony Burgess and Raymond Williams as being too 'female' or 'feminine'.²⁹ By the 1980s, Maud Ellmann argues, Bowen 'was virtually forgotten, especially in academia where her works were sidelined, rarely featuring in syllabi of modern literature'.³⁰

Things have moved on apace since. Ellmann credits the progress made in critical evaluation of Bowen to feminist scholarship. While the recuperation of women writers into academic discourse from the late 1970s onwards had an undoubted impact on renewed discussion of Bowen's fiction, it is significant that Bowen has since transcended the category of woman writer. Ellmann cites Hermione Lee's *Elizabeth Bowen* (1981) as a foundational work in the change of approach to Bowen's work. Lee sets her agenda out

²⁸ Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977), p. 1.

²⁹ Hermione Lee briefly discusses Anthony Burgess's review of *The Little Girl* (1964) in *The Spectator* and Raymond Williams's 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel' (1959) as indicative of this attitude. See Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, rev. edn (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 222-3.

³⁰ Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 17.

right from the beginning: she intends to restore Bowen to ‘her rightful place in literary history’, and does so by comparing her to writers such as Forster, Flaubert, James and Woolf before reconsidering her within the Anglo-Irish tradition of social comedy and ghost stories, in an effort to challenge what she perceives to be the ‘diminish[ing] category of ‘woman’s novelist’.³¹ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle’s *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995) continued to read Bowen in a less gendered way, accomplishing what Glendinning was advocating (though not necessarily achieving) in her work on Bowen nearly twenty years earlier: demonstrating Bowen’s contribution to the twentieth-century novel.³² Other critics, such as Phyllis Lassner and Maud Ellmann, have been less explicitly concerned with the negative connotations that the label ‘woman writer’ carries, but have still engaged with a range of Bowen’s fiction in illuminating ways.³³

Bowen certainly left behind a substantial body of fiction. Her first novel, *The Hotel*, was published in 1927 and her last, *Eva Trout*, in 1968. She released nine novels in between these works: *The Last September* (1929); *Friends and Relations* (1931); *To the North* (1932); *The House in Paris* (1935); *The Death of the Heart* (1939); *The Heat of the Day* (1949); *A World of Love* (1955); *The Little Girls* (1964); and *The Good Tiger* (1965). Bowen was also a prolific short-story writer: her first collection, *Encounters*, was published in 1923, but she is probably best known for *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945). In addition to her fictional works, Bowen also wrote extensively as a

³¹ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, pp. 2-3.

³² Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

³³ See especially Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen* and Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

critic, producing essays, review and introductions.³⁴ This may have contributed to the diversity of her fiction. She adopts a cross-generic approach, drawing on the supernatural, the gothic, fairy tale, social comedy, and realist traditions. Yet throughout her work, there are recurring themes and motifs: displacement, loss, alienation and strangeness.³⁵

This diversity leads to difficulty in categorising Bowen within cultural hierarchies, since her writing employs both realist and modernist literary techniques. Ellmann acknowledges her debt to the traditions of the realist novel, citing Ford Madox Ford, Graham Greene and Henry James as some of her influences.³⁶ But there is also an experimental slant to her writing. There is a temporal flux in her narratives that refuse to unfold entirely chronologically, with their tendency to loop back on themselves. She also experiments with syntax; as Ellmann observes, this is characterised by ‘double negatives, inversions, and obliquities’, frequently attributing ‘the passive mood to human agents’ and ‘the active mood to lifeless objects’.³⁷ Accordingly, Ellmann also emphasises the modernist influences in Bowen’s work, suggesting an affinity with writers such as Eliot, Joyce and Beckett, and drawing attention to Bowen’s engagement with modernity: with technology, travel, and nothingness. There are also frequent comparisons to Woolf throughout critical analysis of Bowen’s work. Glendinning positions her as ‘the link which connects Woolf with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark’.³⁸ Ellmann, meanwhile,

³⁴ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 204.

³⁵ Lee describes her writing as ‘strange’ and ‘dramatic’, and argues that it speaks to ‘the dislocation and dispossession of a whole society’ (Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 228); Bennett and Royle, meanwhile, explore the uncanny elements of Bowen’s fiction.

³⁶ Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page*, p. 16.

³⁷ Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page*, p. 7.

³⁸ Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 1.

highlights how Bowen was seen as a rival to Woolf during the 1940s, contrasting their modernist aesthetics before claiming Bowen to be the greater novelist.³⁹

Implicit in these comparisons is the cultural capital associated with modernism. Ellmann expresses concern about the elision of the more modernist elements of Bowen's writing in the earlier reception of her fiction, scoffing that: '[o]utside the universities [Bowen's] books have remained in print, but their popularity has only helped to ensure their exclusion from English departments where they have often been dismissed (astoundingly!) as middlebrow'.⁴⁰ Ellmann seemingly advocates the recuperation of Bowen as modernist in an effort to elevate her literary status, but in doing so only reiterates the pejorative connotations of the term middlebrow, connotations which may have led to the earlier critical neglect of Bowen's fiction. Lee seemingly concurs, pointing out that Bowen was often marginalised alongside Rosamond Lehmann; both of whom were deemed 'minor' writers, largely because of the way in which they address 'women's lives'.⁴¹ Again, the seeming ordinariness of subject matter, and a perceived female sensibility, is used as a marker of an author's esteem.

Yet while the majority of Lehmann's fiction has been labelled 'romantic', Bowen's has seemingly escaped this tag. This may well be because of Bowen's emphasis on the relationships between women, rather than between women and men. Ellmann tracks how heterosexual relationships in Bowen's fiction are haunted by the presence of at least a third figure, while focusing on the dyadic formation of female friendships. Lee notes how her portrayal of female friendships could allow for a redefinition of her work

³⁹ Ellmann, *Shadow Across the Page*, pp. 15-7.

⁴⁰ Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page*, p. 18.

⁴¹ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 2.

as 'a form of lesbian writing',⁴² and Patricia Coughlan expands on this by identifying a shift in her later fiction such as *The Little Girls* and *Eva Trout* towards a more explicit exploration of lesbian sexuality. The tension between female homosexual and heterosexual elements in Bowen's fiction could allow for more sustained analysis of how her work straddles middlebrow and modernist cultures.

Rosamond Lehmann (1901 – 1990)

Lehmann's work transcended accepted academic categories and genres; they could never quite be identified as modernist or feminist, as straightforward melodrama or romances, as chronicles of war, or of social history, nor could they be confined to discrete levels of brow. Yet it is precisely this heterogeneity which should ensure their place in literary history.⁴³

In her study of Rosamond Lehmann, Wendy Pollard focuses on the reception of Lehmann's work across the period in which she published. An exercise in reader-response theory, Pollard's book looks back at contemporary reviews of Lehmann's fiction in order to position her within the literary and cultural contexts of the time. Pollard advocates Lehmann as a subject worthy of serious academic consideration because of the way in which her work resists categorisation according to height of brow, drawing, as it does, on modernist and feminist advances, as well as middlebrow values. Her study demonstrates the extent to which Lehmann's fiction has slowly been recuperated into academic discourse over the past twenty years or so.

Lehmann has not been the subject of serious literary scrutiny until very recently, and there have only been a handful of studies to date that have grasped the complexities

⁴² Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 11.

⁴³ Wendy Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception* (Alderton: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 166-7.

of her fiction. Born in 1901, Lehmann released her first novel *Dusty Answer* in 1927. She would go on to author several more novels during the 1930s: *A Note in Music* (1930); *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932); and *The Weather in the Streets* (1936). Her next novel, *The Ballad and the Source*, did not appear until a decade later, in 1944. She did write some short stories during the 1940s, which were then collected in *The Gypsy Baby* (1946). Again, there was an interlude in the production of her fiction until *The Echoing Grove* (1953). The death of her daughter Sally in 1958 led to a hiatus in her fiction, until she wrote her last novel *A Sea-Grape Tree* (1976), producing only an autobiography, *The Swan in The Evening* (1967), in the interim. Nonetheless, she did author a relatively substantial body of work during the interwar period, even though her output slowed considerably after the Second World War.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that much of the criticism on her work focuses on her interwar fiction. The novels she produced during this time were certainly well-received and popular in their contemporary climate. Her debut novel, *Dusty Answer*, published by Chatto & Windus in the UK, and Henry Holt & Co in the US, was a critical and commercial success. Pollard points out that Chatto & Windus during this period ‘would certainly have been categorized as literary, rather than commercial, publishers’, housing titles from authors including Aldous Huxley, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Wyndham Lewis, while ‘the literary imprint of Henry Holt & Co carried similar prestige’, including authors such as Proust and May Sinclair on its list.⁴⁴ Generally reviews for *Dusty Answer* were extremely favourable, and the novel sold well on both

⁴⁴ Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann*, pp. 25-6.

sides of the Atlantic, shifting 100,000 copies in America and 14,000 copies in England by December 1927.⁴⁵

The success of *Dusty Answer* catapulted Lehmann to literary celebrity, especially in the US; the aggressive marketing campaign launched by Henry Holt & Co involved Lehmann appearing on TV shows, and featuring in various magazine interviews. She stayed in New York for a brief period in 1927 and Selina Hastings describes how her name became a fixture on the American cultural scene. A considerable factor in the novel's success was its selection as the September 1927 choice for the American Book of the Month Club. Lehmann's subsequent novels, *A Note in Music* and *Invitation to the Waltz*, were also selected for the Book Society in 1928 and the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1930, respectively. Since these book clubs became a focus of interwar concern about the perceived middlebrowing of culture, Lehmann's literary reputation, as Pollard fears, may well have been affected by her association with them.⁴⁶

Certainly the perception of Lehmann as a female and middlebrow novelist (in their pejorative contexts) at the time did lead to a critical focus on the romance and nostalgia of her narratives, as evident in the repeated references to Lehmann's 'feminine sensibility'.⁴⁷ This has been evident in the large numbers of studies of Rosamond Lehmann that sprung up in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁸ No doubt these studies came out of the republishing of Lehmann's novels by Virago in the 1980s, which led to a rediscovery of her fiction. While the academic merit of these studies varies, they do invariably rely on an

⁴⁵ Selina Hastings, *Rosamond Lehmann* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), p. 108.

⁴⁶ Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics*, p. 21.

⁴⁷ Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ There is a raft of these that date from the 1980s onwards. They include Selina Hastings, *Rosamond Lehmann*; Ruth Siegel, *Rosamond Lehmann: A Thirties Writer* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); Judy Simons, *Rosamond Lehmann* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); and Gillian Tindall, *Rosamond Lehmann: An Appreciation* (London: Chatto & Windus/The Hogarth Press, 1985).

intertwining of Lehmann's biography with her fiction, and an insistence on its romantic, feminine qualities. The celebrity of her family during the interwar period has contributed to this focus⁴⁹, as did the publicity surrounding her love life (and particularly her affair with Cecil Day Lewis). Recently, however, there has been a more dynamic engagement with Lehmann's work. This has arisen out of a renewed interest in both romance and middlebrow culture as sites ripe for rescuing from their derogatory contexts. Consequently, critiques of Lehmann's work have diversified, with Andrea Lewis, Sophie Blanch and Diana Wallace making valuable contributions.⁵⁰

Furthermore, these studies have contributed to the discussion of Lehmann within the context of cultural hierarchies. Like Bowen, she employs more experimental narrative strategies, using interior monologue, indirect speech and frequent ellipses. Her admiration of other more experimental writers such as Bowen, Jean Rhys, and Townsend-Warner has been documented, and her movements within intellectual and modernist circles (in which she struck up acquaintances with figures such as Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Carrington) increased her visibility as part of an intellectual community. She also shares with Woolf, and other modernist writers, potentially scandalous subject matter. Her depiction of lesbianism in *Dusty Answer*, homosexuality in *A Note In Music* and abortion in *The Weather in the Streets* all attracted controversy at the time of publication.

⁴⁹ Her brother was the poet John Lehmann, while her sister, Beatrix Lehmann, was a well-known actress.

⁵⁰ Andrea Lewis, 'A Feminine Conspiracy: Contraception, the New Woman, and Empire in Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets*', in *Challenging Modernism: New Readings in Literature and Culture, 1914-45*, ed. by Stella Deen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 81-96; Sophie Blanch, "'Half-amused, Half-mocking": Laughing at the Margins in Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*', *Working Papers on the Web: Investigating the Middlebrow*, 11 (2008) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/Blanch.html>> [accessed 11 September 2009]; and Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*.

Her fictions, then, enable potential points of connection between her and a lesbian, modernist aesthetic, and also lend themselves to an analysis of the single woman.

Eliot Bliss (1903-1990)

In 1982, Alexandra Pringle, then working for Virago, received a letter from a writer called Eliot Bliss, enquiring if the company would be interested in republishing one of her novels that had long been out of print. Pringle explains:

When that autumn I began [Eliot Bliss's] *Luminous Isle* it was with growing wonder and excitement that I read this beautiful, complex novel. It is perhaps a publisher's greatest pleasure to be able to fulfil such a wish – and to be able to bring the work of this unjustly neglected author to a new audience who one feels, and hopes will fully appreciate her at last.⁵¹

Virago republished *Luminous Isle* (1934) in 1984. The novel was actually Bliss's second, and Virago republished her debut, *Saraband* (1931), two years later. A white Creole writer born in Jamaica in 1903, Bliss moved to England as a child, attending a boarding convent in Weston-super-Mare and spending her summer holidays with her Scots grandmother in Twickenham. Her first novel drew on her childhood in England, while her second would make a narrative return to her home of Jamaica. Despite Virago's previously successful role in revitalising the literary reputations of nearly forgotten female writers (or, at the least, bringing them to the attention of mainstream fiction readers), there has been virtually no critical recovery of Bliss following the reprinting of her work. Even recent middlebrow projects have overlooked her novels. The *Encyclopaedia of Women's Writing* does include a brief entry on Bliss, but she has been

⁵¹ Alexandra Pringle, 'Introduction', in *Luminous Isle* by Eliot Bliss (London: Virago, 1984), pp. xi – xix (p. xix).

omitted from numerous studies of Postcolonial and Caribbean literature.⁵² It appears that her third novel, *The Albatross* (1935), was never published, and its existence seems largely unknown: only Michaela A. Calderaro has referred to it.⁵³ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that there has been less than a handful of articles discussing Bliss's fiction. Calderaro and Evelyn O'Callaghan have both attempted to restore her to the Caribbean literary tradition, positioning her alongside Jean Rhys, but both these studies have focused almost exclusively on *Luminous Isle*.⁵⁴

Even in light of her relatively small literary output, the extent to which Bliss has been overlooked is surprising, especially considering that she was part of British literary life during the interwar years. During her time in London in the thirties, Bliss became friends with Dorothy Richardson, Romer Wilson, Jean Rhys, Anna Wickham and Vita Sackville-West, all of whom were important figures in Bliss's personal and professional life. In her introduction to *Luminous Isle*, Pringle casts light on the role several of these friends played in publishing Bliss's novels. Wickham introduced Bliss to the novelist Romer Wilson, who financially supported Bliss so she could complete her draft of *Saraband*. Wickham also introduced her to the literary agent Patience Ross of A. M. Heath, after Chatto & Windus turned down *Saraband*. The novel was instead published in

⁵² There are no references to Bliss in either John McLeod, ed., *Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (London: Routledge 2007); or Daniel Balderston and Mike Gonzalez, eds, *Encyclopaedia of Latin America and Caribbean Literature, 1900-2003* (London: Routledge, 2004). She is, however, briefly referred to in Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds, *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁵³ Michaela A. Calderaro, 'Islands, Colours and Obsessions. The Other and the Self in Three Creole Writers: Jean Rhys, Eliot Bliss, Phyllis Shand Allfrey', in *Rites of Passage: Rational/Irrational/Natural/Supernatural/Local/Global.*, ed. by Carmela Nocera, Gemma Persico and Rosario Portale (Atte del xx Coniegro Nazionale dell'Associazione Italian di Anlistica, Cataria Rogisa 2001), pp. 97-103.

⁵⁴ Michaela A. Calderaro, "'To Be Sexless, Creedless, Classless, Free": Eliot Bliss: A Creole Writer', *Annali di Ca' Foscari: Rivista della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere dell'Università di Venezia* 42.4 (2003), 109-20; Evelyn O'Callaghan, "'The Outsider's Voice": White Creole Women Novelists in the Caribbean Literary Tradition', *Journal of West Indian Literature* 1.1 (1986), 74-88.

Britain by Peter Davies. Although Bliss herself worked at A. M. Heath as a reader, she had fallen out with them by the time she was looking for a publisher for *Luminous Isle*. Eventually, Cobden-Sanderson agreed to publish the book, after a recommendation from Vita Sackville-West.

Her novels have a shared aesthetic with the work of Richardson and Rhys. Richardson in particular was a major influence on Bliss, who had read the opening volumes of *Pilgrimage*. In a conversation with Alexandra Pringle, Bliss explained: ‘She [Richardson] was the first great modern author I’d read, and I thought “My God, this is the only person who’s writing a real book”’.⁵⁵ Pringle goes on to draw parallels between Bliss and Richardson, and other female writers such as May Sinclair, Woolf and Katherine Mansfield. The bases of these comparisons seem to lie in the lyrical nature of Bliss’s writing, a quality identified by Paul Bailey and Faye Hammill.⁵⁶ As Bailey points out, there ‘is no plot, in the conventional sense, in *Saraband*’.⁵⁷ The authors cited by Pringle are all writers who can be associated a modernist aesthetic, and the lyrical abstraction of Bliss’s work is aligned with this. But Bliss’s novels are set in a largely realist environment that continually threatens to pull their heroines back from the dream world they desire to inhabit, metaphorically signifying an ambiguous female subjectivity that can be aligned with either modernist or middlebrow culture.

⁵⁵ Pringle, ‘Introduction’, p. xi.

⁵⁶ Paul Bailey, ‘Introduction’, in *Saraband*, by Eliot Bliss (London: Virago, 1986), pp. v-vii and Faye Hammill, ‘Bliss, Eliot’, in *Encyclopaedia of British Women’s Writing, 1900-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 14-5.

⁵⁷ Bailey, ‘Introduction’, p. v.

Molly Keane (1904 – 1996)

In 1981, Molly Keane published *Good Behaviour*, a satirical tale of the relationship between the aristocratic Aroon St Charles and her domineering mother. The novel was an instant success, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The novel marked the return to the literary scene of Molly Keane, an Anglo-Irish writer who had retreated from writing fiction following the death of her husband nearly twenty years before. She followed *Good Behaviour* with two further novels, *Time After Time* (1983) and *Loving and Giving* (1988), before she died in 1996.

The Booker Prize nomination and the publication of her 1980s novels by the well-respected literary publisher Andre Deutsch revitalized the career of Molly Keane, providing her with both credibility and popular success.⁵⁸ Their success no doubt contributed to Virago's reprinting of her previous works. Born in County Kildare in 1904, Keane had penned her first novel *The Knight of Cheerful Countenance* (1926) by the age of seventeen, under the pseudonym of M. J. Farrell. She went on to produce nine further works of fiction. Particularly prolific during the interwar years, Keane would also write *Devoted Ladies* (1934); *Young Entry* (1928); *Taking Chances* (1929); *Mad Puppetstown* (1931); *Conversation Piece* (1932); *Full House* (1935); and *The Rising Tide* (1937). Her output slowed following the commencement of the Second World War, and *Two Days in Aragon* was published in 1941, but it would be another decade before the publication of her next novel, *Loving Without Tears* (1951), which was followed up by *Treasure Hunt* (1952). She did, however, author several plays in the thirties and forties: *Spring Meeting*

⁵⁸ Other notable titles from this publisher include Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1973) and *Lady Oracle* (1977).

(1938), *Ducks and Drakes* (1942) and *Treasure Hunt* (1949) – which her 1952 novel of the same name was based on – and wrote her final play, *Dazzling Prospect*, in 1961.

The majority of Keane's fictions portrayed the Anglo-Irish life she belonged to. In a conversation with Polly Devlin, Keane discusses her domestic, rural and rather sheltered life, which was dominated by her mother. It was while staying at the house of a family friend that she had her intellectual awakening. As Keane has described: 'it was only when I went to stay in London with some of the women I'd met there, one especially who was very sophisticated and on the fringe of literary and intellectual life in London, and taught me what to read and to go to the theatre, that I began to be in any way educated. I was utterly ignorant'.⁵⁹ Her circumstances may well account for the content of her earlier novels, whose 'famous preoccupations', according to Polly Devlin, are 'horses, romance, snobbery, the world of the landed gentry in Ireland, the hunt as tapestry, the glorious backdrop to life, and the houses of Ireland lying like temples at the very heart of her books'.⁶⁰ Devlin's description of Keane's fiction points to a portrayal of an insular, pre-twentieth-century world of hunting, romance and upper-middle-class, Anglo-Irish life. Indeed, Keane's fiction clearly speaks to the same Anglo-Irish literary tradition Elizabeth Bowen has been positioned in.⁶¹

Consequently, the majority of criticism on Keane has focused on her exploration of the Big House in Irish fiction. Rachael Jane Lynch has written of how Keane's fiction

⁵⁹ Polly Devlin, 'Introduction', in *Devoted Ladies*, by Molly Keane (London: Virago, 1984), pp. v-xiv (p. v).

⁶⁰ Devlin, 'Introduction', p. v.

⁶¹ Although the two writers would become friends, Keane thought Bowen a 'strange lady' when they first met.

tracks the literal and metaphorical crumbling of Anglo-Irish society.⁶² This emphasis is continued in Éibhear Walshe and Gwenda Young's *Molly Keane: Essays in Contemporary Criticism* (2006), the first and, so far, only collection of essays dedicated solely to Keane. Throughout the collection, Keane is positioned as a subversive voice in the Anglo-Irish field, deconstructing its patriarchal conventions, particularly through a focus on the depiction of transgressive female sexuality. It may well be that misreading of Keane's earlier work has led to a hasty dismissal of her as romance novelist. This could partly account for her marginalisation as a writer: there are no biographies of her, and critical discussion is certainly limited. The publication of *Good Behaviour* brought the satirical qualities of Keane's work to the fore, allowing for a re-evaluation of her work as social comedy. Critics such as Lynch, along with Mary Breen and Clare Boylan, have considered Keane as part of an Irish comic tradition characterised by social satire, positioning her alongside writers such as Jonathan Swift and Maria Edgeworth.⁶³ Nonetheless, these studies do not always take into account the sexual transgression of her fiction. Even though Lynch recognises the humour in Keane's earlier work, she argues that these are funny in a less 'ominous' way than her 1980s novels, paying particular attention to *Loving Without Tears* (1951) while still categorising her previous novels as hunting romances.⁶⁴ Breen, by contrast, dismisses the notion that her novels are

⁶² Rachael Jane Lynch, 'The Crumbling Fortress: Molly Keane's Comedies of Anglo-Irish Manners', in *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*, ed. by Theresa O'Connor (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 73-98.

⁶³ See Mary Breen, 'Piggies and Spoilers of Girls: The Representation of Sexuality in the Novels of Molly Keane', in *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. by Éibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), pp. 202-20; Clare Boylan, 'Sex, Snobbery and the Strategies of Molly Keane', in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer, Jr (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 151-60.

⁶⁴ Lynch, 'The Crumbling Fortress', p. 74.

‘romances’, and indeed focuses on the transgressive sexuality evident in the female relationships that Keane depicts.

The engagement with female sexuality and the disintegration of patriarchal power structures in Keane’s texts, as we will see later, does demonstrate a kinship with other female novelists, particularly those associated with the middlebrow. Yet she is not usually considered in middlebrow debates. In a 2006 appraisal of Keane in *The Independent on Sunday*, Lesley McDowell suggested that Keane was considered ‘too commercial and popular a writer to deserve serious critical attention’,⁶⁵ but this would hardly account for the omission of Keane from comparative studies of texts associated with the middlebrow. It may well be that the Irish settings of her novels have prevented this. Although she shares an affinity with Bowen in terms of the Anglo-Irish traditions she addresses, their narrative techniques are dissimilar, with Keane drawing very much on realist conventions. Nonetheless, the subject matter of her fictions, and particularly their portrayal of female relationships, allow for a meaningful re-evaluation of her work in the context of middlebrow cultures.

Antonia White (1899 - 1980)

Despite beginning her writing career at a young age, the number of works produced by Antonia White is relatively small. She began her writing career as a freelancing advertising copywriter for Dearborns, and periodically having her short stories published

⁶⁵ Lesley McDowell, ‘Molly Keane: Men, Manners and Matricide’, *The Independent Sunday*, 11 June 2006 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/molly-keane-manners-men-and-matricide-481966.html>> [accessed 16 August 2010]

in *Westminster Review*.⁶⁶ Her first novel, *Frost in May* did not appear until 1933; although it was well received, it was almost twenty years before she published her next novel *The Lost Traveller* (1950), which she followed in quick succession with *The Sugar House* (1952) and *Beyond the Glass* (1954). She was also in demand as a translator during the 1950s, working on over thirty novels (including many works by Colette), but would only go on to publish two more works of fiction, both of which were children's books: *Minka and Curdy* (1957) and *Living With Minka and Curdy* (1970).

White's literary output was undoubtedly slowed by the recurring bouts of writer's block and manic depression she suffered from throughout her life, which led to her institutionalisation several times. Her stay in Bethlem hospital in 1922 has become part of the mythology surrounding her. Despite the relatively small body of work she left behind, White has enjoyed a moderately successful literary reputation, both throughout her writing career and following her death. *Frost in May* has been her most celebrated work, and was inspired by her own experiences at a Catholic convent as a young child. The novel's success was surprising given the initial trouble that White had securing a publisher. Both Heinemann and Duckworth rejected it,⁶⁷ as did Cobden-Sanderson, even after they had requested first refusal on her first novel after being impressed by her short stories. Eventually a friend of White's, Wyn Henderson, convinced her then-lover, the fledgling publisher Desmond Harmondsworth, that *Frost in May* deserved a chance. The novel was an instant success, selling out its first print run of 2,000 copies, and was

⁶⁶ Jane Dunn, *Antonia White: A Life* (London: Virago, 2002), p. 58.

⁶⁷ Founded in 1890, by the 1930s Heinemann were reputable literary publishers whose back catalogue included titles by authors such as D. H. Lawrence and W. Somerset Maugham; Duckworth had a similar prestige, having published experimental texts by female writers such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson.

quickly reprinted by the Nonesuch Press when it became clear that Harmondsworth was too inexperienced and ill-resourced to continue printing the novel. White's other novels were less successful.

White's fiction was often heavily biographical, and she asserted that *Frost in May* 'was an accurate account of her life at the time, and that almost every incident she wrote about was true'.⁶⁸ *The Lost Traveller* takes up the story of Nanda Grey from *Frost in May*, renaming her Clara Middleton, and is described by Dunn as an exploration of White's own life between the ages of fifteen and eighteen.⁶⁹ *The Sugar House* and *Beyond the Glass* also draw on White's own experiences, charting her marriage troubles and mental health difficulties, respectively. White's personal life was certainly a colourful one. Married three times by the time she was thirty, her first two marriages had been annulled on the grounds that they were unconsummated. Both her marital troubles and her manic depression led to White undergoing psychoanalysis several times during her life, and her novels reveal a preoccupation with her protagonist's negotiation of both male and female relationships.

There has been a biographical emphasis in literary criticism of her work. Jane Dunn's biography *Antonia White* does refer to her fiction and its reception, but the majority of the work is devoted to exploring White's relationship with her dominant father and offering cod-psychological explanations for White's emotional difficulties. Critical discussions also tend to offer psychoanalytical readings. Andrea Peterson, Sophie Blanch and Pauline Palmer all adopt what Peterson terms a 'matricentric' approach: that is, a consideration of the depiction of mothers and daughters in the novel. The intense,

⁶⁸ Dunn, *Antonia White*, p. 39.

⁶⁹ Dunn, *Antonia White*, p. 52.

all-female community of *Frost in May* certainly lends itself to this, but there is a sense that these critics fail to thoroughly engage with the theoretical problematics of reading White's fiction as autobiographical. For example, Peterson's acceptance of the texts as autobiographical is somewhat superficial; although she acknowledges that '[a]utobiographical fiction remains highly problematic' she still asserts that 'by choosing to work within this genre, White clearly wanted to be identified with Nanda'.⁷⁰ Viewing the text as an extension of the author herself, Peterson's response overlooks the impact of the sometimes scandalous lives of women writers on their literary reputations. The publication of two volumes of White's diaries by Virago, and the writing of two memoirs of her, one by each of her daughters, has perhaps only exacerbated this.⁷¹

Comparative studies have considered Antonia White alongside the American writer Emily Holmes Coleman. Both Kylie Valentine and Sherah Wells have looked at the motif of madness in both White and Coleman's fiction and lives.⁷² These studies' recognition of the affinities in White's and Coleman's work is indicative of White's position in modernist circles. Although her work draws on realist techniques, it often involves a similar search for female subjectivity that characterises many modernist texts. White's biographical connections with other modernist writers may also have contributed

⁷⁰ Andrea Peterson, 'From White to Grey: a Psychoanalytical Approach to *Frost in May* (1933)', *Working Papers on the Web: Children's Literature*, 10 (2007) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/childrens/Peterson.html>> [accessed 27 November 2009]

⁷¹ Antonia White, *Diaries 1926-1957, Volume One*, ed. by Susan Chitty (London: Constable, 1991); Antonia White, *Diaries 1958-1979, Volume Two*, ed. by Susan Chitty (London: Constable, 1992); Susan Chitty, *Now To My Mother: A Very Personal Memoir of Antonia White* (London: Weidenfeld, 1985); Lyndall Passerini Hopkinson, *Nothing to Forgive: A Daughter's Life of Antonia White* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988).

⁷² See Kylie Valentine, 'Mad and Modern: A Reading of Emily Holmes Coleman and Antonia White', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 22.1 (2003), 121-47; Sherah Wells, 'Strand by Strand: Untying the Knots of Mental and Physical Illness in the Correspondence and Diaries of Antonia White and Emily Holmes Coleman,' in *The Tapestry of Health, Illness and Disease*, ed. by Veral Kalitzkus and Peter L. Twhig (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 43-55.

to a consideration of her work in a modernist context. For most of her adult life, White lived in Chelsea, an area of London described as Dunn as a 'raffish and less serious pole to Bloomsbury'.⁷³ Her location gave her access to a wide-ranging creative community that included the artists Eliot Seabrooke, Katherine Hale and Jon Souter-Roberston, all of whom would attend the Sunday afternoon tea parties that White held at her house during the 1930s. Through Seabrooke, White first met Virginia Woolf at party thrown by Vanessa Bell and, while the two would not become intimate friends, Woolf was nevertheless a writer whom White aspired to equal.

White also gained a certain amount of acceptance into the fold of American modernism. In 1938, Henry Miller expressed an interest in publishing one of White's short stories, 'The House of Clouds' in *Booster*, an avant-garde literary magazine. Miller initially published three of White's poems, 'The Crest', 'The Double Man' and 'Epitaph', before 'The House of Clouds' appeared later that year in the rechristened *Delta*, alongside writers Anaïs Nin, Laurence Durrell and Miller himself. White additionally became part of a network of American female modernists. After meeting Emily Coleman at a party in 1933, White was introduced to Peggy Guggenheim and Djuna Barnes. As with Woolf, Barnes would become a figure of both awe and intimidation for White. Inspired by the time these writers spent together at one of Guggenheim's homes (which was effectively a rural literary salon, set in the Devon countryside), Elizabeth Podnieks and Sandra Chait's *Hayford Hall* explores both the personal and professional relationships among them. Although White is included in the study, there is a sense that she is a marginalised figure. Podnieks and Chait note that although White was an important figure there, Guggenheim

⁷³ Dunn, *Antonia White*, p. 10.

considered the core group of Hayford Hall literary figures to consist of herself, Barnes, Coleman and John Holm, and accordingly, the majority of the essays focus on those writers.⁷⁴ White herself may have not felt entirely worthy of being involved in the salon; although she would remain great friends with Coleman, White was intimidated by Barnes's powerful presence, and matters were not helped when Barnes admitted that, despite her best efforts, she was not wholly impressed by *Frost in May*.⁷⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, however, was a fan, praising her in an introduction to a 1948 edition of the text. The novel's literary significance was cemented when it reappeared as the first ever Virago Modern Classic in 1978. Carmen Callil's championing of White undoubtedly helped restore her to mainstream and critical attention. By the time of her death, all her fiction was back in print. Although Dunn notes that sales of White's work have begun to decline (particularly following the publication of her diaries and her daughter's memoirs), it may well prove that reintegration of White into a middlebrow context could open up new avenues for exploration, drawing her into comparative studies with other authors and moving away from an emphasis on the biographical in her work.

Section Two: Textual Analysis

Molly Keane's *Devoted Ladies* (1924)

Devoted Ladies fixes its satirical eye on an urban world where passionate female friendship is replaced with a more sadistic relationship. The novel addresses the potentially lesbian relationship between two single women, Jessica and Jane. Mary Breen

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Podnieks and Sandra Chait, eds, *Hayford Hall: Hangovers, Erotics and Modernist Aesthetics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), p. 4.

⁷⁵ Dunn, *Antonia White*, p. 159.

has argued that in Keane's fictions homosexual relationships are not 'marginal' or 'apart', but are an 'interwoven part of a complex series of interpersonal relationships'.⁷⁶ While this may be true of *Devoted Ladies*, it does not adequately signal how the book plays with tropes of passionate female friendships to satirise the image of the butch/femme lesbian couple. Jane exemplifies bourgeois, bohemian femininity: rich, American, heavily made-up, and with a penchant for brandy-and-soda; Jessica, conversely, strives to appear as mannish as possible with 'her dark hair [...] cut with a charming severity'.⁷⁷ The dynamic between the two women is one of subservience and domination: Jane appears at the mercy of the possessive and violent Jessica, as Jane explains to her friend Sylvester: "“Why, Sylvester, last week she threw such a temperament she just smashed all the china in the bathroom and then she lay and bit the bath till she broke a tooth in it””(p.19). The women are obvious caricatures, hammed up for comic effect. As Breen points out, their portrayal places them into a butch/femme binary,⁷⁸ but there appears a misfit between the stereotypes the women are based on and the actual characters they appear to be. The scar across Jane's face (the remnant of a hare lip) prevents her from being the striking beauty she aspires to be while Jessica's attempt at masculinity is thwarted by her 'positive bosom and massive thighs' (p. 42). Furthermore, their household is hardly one of domestic harmony, and Jane expresses her desire to extract herself from her relationship with Jessica, wondering 'what, anyhow, she still saw for herself in the difficult and passionate friendship' (p. 45).

⁷⁶ Mary Breen, 'Piggies and Spoilers of Girls: The Representation of Sexuality in the Novels of Molly Keane', in *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. by Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), pp. 202-20 (p. 208).

⁷⁷ Molly Keane, *Devoted Ladies* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 42. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

⁷⁸ Breen, 'Piggies and Spoilers of Girls', p. 214.

The satiric representation of this ‘passionate friendship’ undermines its potential to be an alternative to heterosexuality, and instead the text pulls Jane into a romance narrative. A love interest is provided for her in the guise of George Playfair, a Catholic Anglo-Irishman whom she meets at party held by her friend Sylvester. The narrative knowingly plays with romantic conventions when George sends Jane a selection of books pulled straight from the tradition of Irish hunting romances, including such titles as *The Wanderings of William* and *Young Entry*.⁷⁹ This type of fiction, with its emphasis on upper-middle-class courtship, is part of the patriarchal, patrilineal tradition of the Anglo-Irish ‘Big House’. Transgressive female sexuality is framed by the pull between the decadence of the metropolitan, and the domesticity of the rural sphere. In London, Jane idly attends parties, both drinking and flirting to excess: ‘her favourite drink was brandy; brandies and sodas followed by a mass of liqueur brandies rolling pleasantly in their large hot glasses’ (p. 5). She enjoys them so much she literally ends up in George’s lap during one party, and is unable to leave her bed following it because of alcohol poisoning. Jane is free to indulge herself because of her widow status: having been left a substantial sum of money by her deceased husband, she can enjoy the economic benefits of marriage without having to perform any of its domestic responsibilities. The potential reabsorption of Jane into a domestic narrative is literalised when she visits the south of Ireland and is thus transplanted directly into the setting of the heterosexual romance plots she is wooed with.

The use of Ireland as a site for the exploration of the heterosexual script is, however, problematised in the text. Sylvester’s cousins, Hester and Viola (known as

⁷⁹ An in-joke: the latter is an actual novel by Keane.

Piggy) Brown, are residents in Kildare. At thirty-six and thirty-two, respectively, the sisters live spinsters' lives together, largely isolated and plagued by poor finances:

True, an equal share in Kilque Hester had with Piggy. But of what value is an equal share of even entire possession of a small estate in the South of Ireland? Of or a house in any country with a mildly leaking roof and mildly defective drainage? (p. 86)

The dilapidated house works as a metaphor for the two decaying sisters themselves, suggesting the tragic figure of the surplus woman as well as signalling a disintegrating country-house tradition. Hester, however, is disconnected from any potential romantic plot, having 'professed little interest in the amatory side of life', instead favouring a search for money (p. 86). Piggy is depicted as the woman left on the shelf, but her passionate attachment to her friend Joan whom she loves 'with a flaming devotion that was her one true excitement in life' (p. 89) is suggestive of a more ambiguous sexuality. There is little doubt that the attraction Piggy feels is physical; when Joan shows her calf muscle off, her heart 'thump[s]' (p. 148). Paradoxically, Piggy perceives Joan as a paradigm of domesticity:

beautiful, happily married (happy and faithful in marriage) [with] two charming sons, an attractive husband, several good horses, a garden in which everything that was planted grew fat and well, many willing and obedient servants, a good seat on the horse and an inexhaustible fund of conversation about horses. (p. 90)

Piggy constructs Joan as a heroine of the Irish domestic romance, yet this is at odds with the narrative's positioning of Joan; we see little of her perspective in the novel and, when we do, she appears child-like and superficial, putting up with 'prize-bore Piggy' in order to make use of her car for racing (p. 160). The parodic invoking of Irish romance fiction undermines not only the domestic idyll it perpetuates, but also the heterosexual narrative which Joan is part of.

The potentially transgressive projection of her feelings for Joan is symptomatic of Piggy's own ambivalent position in the heterosexual script. Piggy harbours fantasies of romance; sitting at her dressing table, she adorns herself with diamonds and sits amongst candles (since such items 'are romantically correct') and invents imaginary scenarios about suitors offering her dances and praising her beauty (p. 258). The image is reminiscent of a young girl playing dress-up, enacting the codes of femininity that the heterosexual will demand of her, but Piggy realises this must remain a fantasy, for she knows herself 'to be outside love, for ever' and is '[b]lindly aware that this thing was never for her' (p. 170). It remains ambiguous as to whether her marginalisation is because of her desire for Joan, or because of her stunted sexual development. The only real-life hope for Piggy to fulfil her heterosexual desires is her friendship with George Playfair. Around George, Piggy assumes the role of a stricken young girl in love, but she becomes 'silent and awkward and tiresome' (p. 217). Her inability to vocalise her desire means even the discourse of heterosexuality eludes her.

Revealingly, when Piggy realises that George is interested in Jane, she does not appear particularly emotionally affected by it; certainly not compared to the devastation she feels when she discovers that Jane has been accepted into Joan's circle of friends: 'Her heart beat and tore within her breast [...]. She could realise nothing except that Joan had betrayed her. This unkindness was all betrayal. Another was chosen and Piggy the faithful and living was of no more account' (p. 261). With both the hetero- and the homosexual closed to her, Piggy clearly decides to go out with a bang. When she realises the threat that Jessica poses to George's relationship with Jane, she drives Jessica and herself off a cliff in her car. She:

did not think. She only felt and knew. Her blind gift for serving when she loved cast out all fear. She put her foot down on the accelerator and the car leapt forward and dropped. (p. 303)

Piggy's justification of her actions is based upon her desire to safeguard the union of George and Jane; she secures Jane's reabsorption into the romance (and therefore heterosexual) narrative of the novel, but only by absenting herself from it. However, the extremity and blatant melodrama of the episode renders romance as comedic as the female love that the novel satirises.

Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927)

The Hotel is cited by Diana Wallace as an example of the predatory lesbian motif found in women's interwar fiction.⁸⁰ The depiction of this is certainly more subtle than in *Devoted Ladies*. The supposed lesbian relationship Wallace refers to here is between the middle-aged, widowed Mrs Kerr and the twenty-two year-old Sydney Warren. The eponymous hotel that the two reside in suggests they should epitomise middle-class respectability, but instead both Sydney and Mrs Kerr become the subjects of gossip. Mrs Kerr is incongruous with the other women of her generation in residence. While they congregate in the drawing room and occupy themselves with the embroidery of 'unpractical and therefore permissible' items and after-dinner games of bridge, Mrs Kerr's lack of 'interests' and her absence from communal (and domestic) activities in favour of sitting alone on her balcony distances her from the traditionally feminine pursuits of the middle classes.⁸¹ Sydney, meanwhile, is perceived as 'queer' (p. 37), and

⁸⁰ Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*, p. 29.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Hotel* (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. 59-60. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

the gender ambiguity of her first name points towards her awkwardness within gender conventions, an awkwardness that is only heightened by her academic distinction and her introspective tendencies.

The unusualness of Sydney and Mrs Kerr's relationship comes under particular scrutiny. As one of the female guests observes, "[Sydney] is very much ... absorbed, isn't she, by Mrs Kerr?" (p. 60). The pause before the choice of the word 'absorbed' implies an unusual fascination on Sydney's part, and the ellipses gesture towards the guests' awareness of what this represents:

'I have known *other* cases,' said somebody else, looking about vaguely for her scissors, 'of these very violent friendships. One didn't feel *those others* were quite healthy'. (p. 60)

The unease about such friendships is clear, and the debated 'healthiness' of such 'cases' invokes a medical discourse which pathologises intense female friendships.⁸² The suspicion of Sydney and Mrs Kerr's relationship is further compounded by the way in which Sydney's friend, Tessa Bellamy, feels compelled to defend her: "And how few men there are out here – can one wonder the girls are eccentric? They say it's the same all places – not a man to be had" (p. 60). The women's discussion draws on post-war anxiety over a diminished male demographic, and the fashioning of an erotic model of female friendship. Wallace has attributed this to Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis, arguing that their construction of both the lesbian and spinster as "unnatural" [...] forced another wedge between women'.⁸³ What Wallace touches on here, but does not draw out explicitly, is the increasing synonymy of the spinster and lesbian.

⁸² The 'other' cases also have a double resonance, as part of a specific psychoanalytic discourse that 'Others' these friendships. These words are also reminiscent of Miss Climpson's in *Unnatural Death*.

⁸³ Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*, p. 26.

The distinction between heterosexual and lesbian desire is further complicated by the presence of a more traditional romance plot. The narrative offers Sydney the opportunity to escape her relationship with Mrs Kerr by presenting a love interest in the form of Mr Milton, a clergyman staying at the hotel. Early on, a connection between Sydney and Mr Milton is established:

‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘Haven’t I met you before?’
‘Only last night,’ she said [...] Then she wondered whether he knew that by just such a question do young men – at dances and elsewhere – strike for the first time the personal note. It is asked leaning forward intensely with the implication ‘you ever-remembered face!’ He could not have said this to many young women; he said it this time too awkwardly. (p. 41)

Sydney appears conscious of the potential romantic subtext to Mr Milton’s question, but her emotionally detached understanding of courtship reads as though it were learned in a textbook and it becomes a possible marker of her “unnaturalness” in a heterosexual narrative. Sydney’s difficulties in understanding heterosexual desire are further emphasised when Mrs Kerr enquires whether many men have ever admired her. Sydney ‘flung around at her, startled into a brilliant flush. “I don’t know: I’ve never been sure of it”’ (pp. 68-9). The attraction between Sydney and Mr Milton remains unconsummated in the novel. Mr Milton spontaneously proposes to Sydney, but she initially rejects his offer, the expression of his desire for her leaving Sydney feeling as though a ‘bell-glass [...] descend[ed]’ around her (p. 95). His attraction to her oppresses Sydney, but she surrenders to it briefly, later accepting Mr Milton’s offer when Mrs Kerr begins to distance herself from their friendship. Ultimately, though, she breaks off their engagement, arguing that marriage would be ‘quite impossible’ and ascribing her temporary consideration of their union to ‘some funny law of convenience’ (pp. 181-2). If this ‘law’ is seen as symbolic of normative models of the domestic and heterosexual, then

Sydney's refusal to marry Milton is emblematic of her recognition of, and her resistance to, the narrative of heterosexual romance.

The disintegration of Sydney's friendship with Mrs Kerr as the novel progresses means that the potential of a lesbian resolution is equally unlikely. The arrival of Mrs Kerr's son, Ronald, blocks the progression of a lesbian romance. When Sydney learns of Ronald's impending visit, she reacts as a rejected lover might; following Mrs Kerr's reassurance that Sydney has proved good company in lieu of Ronald, Sydney seeks further validation 'hungrily' and speaks to Mrs Kerr with 'a desperate directness' (p. 72). Sydney appears suspicious of Ronald, yet the irony is that Sydney and Ronald would have, arguably, been the likeliest heterosexual pairing in the novel. The text acknowledges that the union between Sydney and Ronald would fit the conventions of a romantic plot; when Milton sees the two walking together he observes that:

the two were like each other; they had the same build and the same carriage and might have been brother and sister – to, he believed, the advantage of both. He realised that this was the first time he had ever seen them together. It would be last time, also, perhaps. They had been foredoomed in the very nature of things to miss one another? Biting a lip he looked back – had he been instrumental? There was pathos for him in this ghost of a contact, well-timed in this drained-out, colourless ghost of a day. (p. 167)

The spectre of a romantic relationship between Ronald and Sydney haunts the text but does not materialise; in its place stands an allusion to a brother and sister relationship. Milton's anxiety that his ill-advised proposal to Sydney may have somehow prevented her from entering the domestic sphere with a more suitable love match is not only misplaced, but hints at an incestuous subtext. The relationship between Sydney and Ronald is hostile from the beginning – Ronald deems Sydney 'unnatural' (p. 107) while Sydney perceives him as a rival for his mother's affections. Furthermore, a union

between them would result in Sydney becoming Mrs Kerr's daughter-in law. The age gap between the women would befit a mother and daughter, and Mrs Kerr does concede that Sydney is 'an almost strange young woman, the school friend, as it might be, of a daughter' (p. 133). But the potentially erotic friendship between the women means the text has already resisted constructing their relationship in these terms. The triangular relationship between Sydney, Mrs Kerr and Ronald is rife with incestuous potential, thus distorting the familial structure at the heart of heterosexual romance.

This spectre of incest refigures not only paradigms of femininity in the text, but also those of masculinity. The conception of Mrs Kerr as a mother figure remains confused throughout the text. When Ronald rejects as the 'idea that a mother should [...] "live for me"' as 'barbarous', Mrs Kerr retorts that 'she cannot disentangle [herself] from the idea that it isn't quite right for a woman not to be a little barbarous' (p. 109). Mrs Kerr recognises the expectations placed on her as a mother, and the social conventions governing the role, and yet chooses to defy them. Accordingly, the scrutiny of Sydney and Mrs Kerr is replaced by scrutiny of Ronald and Mrs Kerr. Veronica Lawrence, a guest at the hotel, observes: "'She doesn't seem to have taken any notice of him for years and now they go all over the place like Romeo and Juliet'" (p. 114). This reconfiguration means that the relationship between Mrs Kerr and Ronald becomes as unnatural as that between Mrs Kerr and Sydney. In her analysis of *The Hotel*, Maud Ellmann reads the relationship between the three psychoanalytically, emphasising that Mrs Kerr's rejection of Sydney in favour of her son signifies a departure from Freud's hypothesis that 'the daughter abandons the mother for the father and graduates from homosexual to

heterosexual desire'.⁸⁴ While Ellmann's analysis is useful in that it draws attention to the impasse that heterosexual relations reach in the text, it is dependent on the idea that Mrs Kerr rejects Sydney. The ending of the novel, though, suggests that it may in fact be the other way round. After her break-up with Mr Milton, Sydney leaves the hotel and says a final goodbye to Mrs Kerr: 'Sydney did pause in the threshold and look back uncertainly, Mrs Kerr held out a hand; then she turned again and went out, shutting the door behind her so quietly that Mrs Kerr and Ronald only heard the latch click' (p. 192). The reading of Mrs Kerr as the predatory lesbian, in this context, becomes weakened. Sydney, meanwhile, does not 'graduate from homosexual to heterosexual desire' but abandons them both. The impasse that Ellmann reads as a recurring motif of Bowen's becomes symbolic of how the *The Hotel* can subvert the heterosexual romance, but cannot offer an alternative narrative for the single woman.

Eliot Bliss's *Saraband* (1931)

Saraband appears less concerned with potential lesbian relationships, and more focused on the adolescent development of gender and sexual identity. The novel chronicles the early life of Louie Burnett, 'a funny little independent girl' whose solitariness symbolises her awkward position in a heterosexual narrative.⁸⁵ In her early years Louie rather childishly professes her aversion to men – "I hate boys! I hate them, I hate them, I hate them" (p. 34) – and is quick to declare that she doesn't 'want to get married' (p. 127). She grows close to her cousin Tim, but her interest in him seems based on his ambivalent gender. As Louie describes:

⁸⁴ Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 77.

⁸⁵ Eliot Bliss, *Saraband* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 59. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

Strictly speaking, she realised that this was not a boy at all. He had the face of a beautiful girl, yet it was not a girl's face; those small, straight features and that line going through the middle of his mouth, where the lips closed, was not girlish. (p. 38)

Rather than possessing inherently masculine or feminine features, Tim is positioned between genders: not a boy, yet not quite a girl. Nevertheless, the face is eroticised, and the text lingers over the sensual features of the mouth and the lips. The text hints towards a narrative of adolescent sexual development which has not yet reached its resolution.

This negotiation is marked by a struggle in female subjectivity in the novel, as the spectre of heterosexual romance moves through the narrative. At first men appear as competition for Louie; when her brother Max is born, Louie realises that 'she did not love her mother in the same way' (p. 14). While Louie is at a loss to articulate a reason for this, a Freudian reading might suggest that Louie is in the process of moving away from a pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother, signifying the beginning of normative sexual development. The arrival of Tim provides the opportunity for a romance narrative and, despite Louie's initial anxiety, a friendship between the two quickly develops. The physicality of their relationship is often understated: when it looks as though Tim may have to abandon his plans to pursue music, Louie 'put her hand into his, feeling it to be the only form of sympathy she could offer him' (p. 58). Although an attraction is alluded to it is never acted on, and Louie finds the prospect of having Tim kiss her alien, 'a strange, frightening idea' (p. 81). The appearance of Daisy, the daughter of Louie's Aunt Mary, introduces a would-be love rival for Louie, but the potential relationship between Tim and Daisy remains unrealised in the text. The inability of the narrative to subsume Louie and/or Tim into a romance plot not only points to anxiety over female sexuality, but also signifies their resistance to what DuPlessis might term the 'heterosexual script'.

The physicality of romance is instead reworked in the novel. Daisy's attraction to Tim is presented as superficial: Louie speculates how 'one would have felt she would have been quite content to look at his legs through the most intellectual music and would have pronounced it wonderful afterwards' (p. 187). Louie's perception that a kiss from Tim would be odd should not be read as straightforward rejection of physical intimacy. At a music recital, Tim sits down 'holding [Louie's] fingers near his side so that no-one else should see' (pp. 190-1). Their physical contact remains curiously devoid of a sexual subtext and Louie is clearly far from frightened by it: instead, she is reassured. Tim 'cajol[es] out of [Louie's] hand what was the matter of her' but the ensuing conversation is only imagined by Louie. In it, Louie confesses her dislike of Daisy while Tim maintains that he is different from other men (pp. 191-4). While the text draws on the discourse of courtship, Tim's difference and the previous allusions to his ambivalent sexuality suggests a homosexual subtext. More significantly, given that the conversation is only imagined by Louie, it marks the manipulation of romantic conventions to enable the female subject to resolve her internal conflict.

This conflict moves beyond anxiety over the adolescent development of heterosexual desire, and into the realm of wider struggles of female subjectivity. As a young girl, Louie possesses an active imagination, as her mother observes: "'She's dreaming [...] She's always dreaming. I think she lives in a world of her own'" (p. 11). This world is not always peaceful for Louie though: she is plagued by nightmares in which she has visions of hell and devils and darkness (p. 27). For Louie, the unconscious marks a realm of fear and turmoil yet, as the novel progresses and Louie navigates her way through the obstacles of heterosexual order, she learns to create a psychic space for

herself that is divorced from the sensual needs of the body, one in which she can belong ‘to a secret society of her own’ (p. 284). In their analyses of Bliss’ other published novel, *Luminous Isle*, both Michaela A. Calderaro and Evelyn O’Callaghan have emphasised the exile that the white Creole woman endures. Calderaro describes a ‘frustrated and frustrating search for a “Self” that is not always or not only an “Other”’,⁸⁶ while Callaghan claims that ‘the white Creole writer (and protagonist) – especially the female of the species – represents the “outsider’s voice”’.⁸⁷ The struggle of the white Creole woman and her fear of being marginalised by her difference that is articulated in *Luminous Isle* is transposed in *Saraband* onto the female adolescent and her negotiation of sexual development.⁸⁸ In doing so, the narrative explores how even the young single woman who risks being marginalised by her resistance to heterosexual scripts can attempt to reclaim her subjectivity through a journey into the female interior.

This journey promises the hope of success, at least initially. At the end of the novel, Louie describes how:

She wished to see her soul. There was a long mirror in the room, and she went to it. Stood in front of it. And very slowly she saw her soul emerge out of the flesh, Smiling; more so. A truer edition of herself. (p. 301)

This represents a pivotal moment, both in the text and in the formation of Louie’s sexual identity. The episode calls to mind the Lacanian conception of the ‘mirror I’, the moment at which an infant identifies with its mirror image; the stage ‘which manufactures for the

⁸⁶ Michaela A. Calderaro, ‘Islands, Colours and Obsessions. The Other and the Self in Three Creole Writers: Jean Rhys, Eliot Bliss, Phyllis Shand Allfrey’ in *Rites of Passage: Rational/Irrational/Natural/Supernatural/Local/Global*, ed. by Carmela Nocera, Gemma Persico and Rosario Portale (Atte del xx Coniegro Nazionale dell’ Associazione Italian di Alista, Cataria Rogica, 4-6 October 2001), pp. 97-103 (p. 97).

⁸⁷ Evelyn O’Callaghan, ‘“The Outsider’s Voice”: White Creole Women Novelists in the Caribbean Literary Tradition’, *Journal of West Indian Literature*. 1.1 (1986), 74-88 (p. 77).

⁸⁸ Though Bliss herself was a white Creole, I do not necessarily suggest here that we read *Saraband* as a psychoanalytic expression of Bliss’ sense of self. I merely suggest parallels between the two fictions.

subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality'.⁸⁹ Although Louie has clearly matured far beyond the infant stage, and her experience includes the presence of the soul (a concept that is absent from Lacan's writing) the theory still proves useful in Louie's negotiation of her female subjectivity. It is only through the mirror stage that a subject can grasp its sense of self, even if the self becomes confused by the mirror image.

However as Sean Homer points out, this imaginary process means a:

conflict is produced between the infant's fragmented sense of self and the imaginary autonomy out of which the ego is born [...]. To exist one has to be recognised by an-other. But this means that our image, which is equal to ourselves, is mediated by the gaze of the other. The other, then, becomes the guarantor of ourselves. We are at once dependent on the other as guarantor of our existence and a bitter rival to that same other.⁹⁰

In Louie's belated experience, though, this conflict seems absent; far from being a 'bitter rival' her image simply smiles at her self. If we accept Lacan's theory that the ego maintains an illusion of mastery of this image that the self does not actually have, then the emergence of Louie's image as her 'truer' self and its abstraction from her body removes the conflict that characterises the ego. As such, Louie can reclaim an interior reality for herself that is detached from any heterosexual romance. Tim may well signify 'the sharp image [...] the needle-point of things' (p. 244), but the nature of their relationship, with its emphasis on the psychic rather than the physical, suggests that it is an image which Louie can use for navigation, and retreat from when no longer required. Yet it only marks the emergence of the 'truer' self, not the 'truest'. Since this journey

⁸⁹ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the "I" as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Tavistock: Tavistock Publications, 1977) pp. 1-7 (p. 4).

⁹⁰ Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 26.

does not necessarily hold a resolution, female subjectivity is implied to be fractured and multiple.

Antonia White's *Frost in May* (1933)

The negotiation of adolescent sexuality also forms a large part of the narrative impetus of *Frost in May*, which follows the story of Nanda Grey, the nine year-old daughter of a Catholic convert who enters the Convent of the Five Wounds in Lippington. Before she even enters the convent, Nanda appears to conform to patriarchal authority; 'very fond of her father' (p. 39) she conforms to his wishes and acts as 'one of those children who cannot help behaving well'.⁹¹ Initially, the problematic female figure in the family is her mother, Mrs Grey: "Those dreadful gloves," wailed Mrs Grey. "They make you look as if you bit your nails or something. And you've got the sweetest little hands" (p. 39). Her almost hysterical fixation on Nanda's physical appearance infantilises Mrs Grey and Nanda assumes the maternal role, calming her mother down and 'patiently' explaining the regulations and rules at the Convent to her. The role reversal ironically makes Nanda complicit with patriarchal hegemony, since she begins to exercise control over her mother: 'Nanda had some difficulty in restraining her mother from darting away down various forbidden alleys, but, helped by her father, she kept her in fairly good order' (p. 38). Nanda restrains her mother *with* the help of her father, and this is indicative of how she has internalised what Lacan terms the 'law of the father',⁹² and become implicated in the regulation of female sexuality and subjectivity.

⁹¹ Antonia White, *Frost in May* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 39 and p. 17.

⁹² Broadly speaking, this refers to the child's assimilation into the phallic order, in which the child suppresses their desire for the mother and instead perceives itself as a separate subject.

The symbolic father of the text, the ultimate signifier of patriarchy, is the Convent itself. Sophie Blanch has argued that White ‘challenges the traditional notion of the convent as site of female duty and subservience to an elevated patriarchal authority’ by ‘reimagining the convent as the enclosed space of the maternal realm’.⁹³ Indeed, if read metaphorically, the all-female environment contained within the convent walls points towards an enclosed pastoral idyll, away from the corruptions of modernity. However, in spite of Blanch’s description of the ‘vast catalogue of maternal functions’ in the text, it is difficult to see how the patriarchal script can be elided to the extent that she suggests. Certainly the nuns of the Convent attempt to police and police female sexuality.⁹⁴ Mother Poitier, a nun who is described as ‘the great repository of stories and guardian of pious traditions’, recounts the tale of a family living in France to the girls at the convent. During a game of hide and seek on the eve of her wedding, the eldest daughter disappears and is never found. Years later, again during a game of hide-and-seek, one of her sisters enters the underground passage and cellars of her house that have been designated forbidden areas by her parents and loses her way.

[w]hen she was nearly mad with terror, she saw something white in a corner [...]. She went towards it and saw that it was a young woman crouching down by the wall. The child spoke to her, but the young woman did not answer. She was wearing a beautiful satin dress and a veil with flowers, but the flowers were all withered. The child went closer and touched her, and the young woman crumbled away. The little girl screamed and screamed. Then [...] she asked God to forgive her for having forgotten her morning prayers in her desire for pleasure. (pp. 70-1)

The text employs Gothic motifs traditionally associated with anxiety over female sexuality: forbidden walls and the disintegration of the virginal white of the bride’s dress

⁹³ Sophie Blanch, ‘The Sacred Space of the “Mother-House”’: Reading Maternal Metaphors in Antonia White’s *Frost in May*, *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 4 (2002), 121-28 (p. 121).

⁹⁴ Blanch, ‘The Sacred Space of the “Mother-House”’, p. 123.

stand as a warning against the potential pollution of sex. The image of the ‘benevolent mother-figure’ who Blanch argues ‘elicits the iconic status of the nuns’ is absent, and instead the nuns re-inscribe the patriarchal values of the Gothic fairy tale.⁹⁵

Furthermore, the enclosed female space of the convent itself feeds into anxiety over sexual transgression. This manifests itself in nervousness over the intimate friendships that the girls form with one another. In this respect, the text has close affinities with the girls’ school story. Diana Wallace argues that:

Girls’ schools were seen as sexual hothouses, forcing illicit, unhealthy emotions between women. Deprived of more ‘normal objects’ for their desire, their ‘natural rivalry’ was supposedly channelled into competition for other women, specifically teachers, rather than ‘healthy’ competition of men.⁹⁶

The eroticisation of female friendship in psychoanalytic and sexological discourse that Wallace describes resonates throughout *Frost in May*. Mother Radcliffe reprimands Nanda for writing to her parents about a fellow pupil’s appearance, declaring that ‘the school rule does not approve of particular friendships’ since they ‘are against charity’ and ‘lead [...] to dangerous and unhealthy indulgence of feeling’ (p. 144). This indulgence of feeling invokes the image of the female hysteric, with her inability to regulate her own emotions. The physical manifestation of these eroticised feelings is evident in the ‘particular friendships’ that are formed:

Clare leaned over and touched Nanda’s arm with a hot quivering hand that burned through her Holland sleeve [...]. Clare’s touch embarrassed and enlightened her; it gave her the queerest shivering sensation in the roof of the mouth. Why was it when everyone else seemed just face and hands, Clare always reminded one that there was a warm body under her uniform? (p. 113)

⁹⁵ Blanch, ‘The Sacred Space of the “Mother-House”’, p. 124.

⁹⁶ Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*, p. 33.

The alarmingly sensual description brings the eroticism of adolescent female friendships to the fore. Even more troublesome is the apparent absence of competition between the girls: without an adult object of desire to project onto, the girls instead turn to each other.

Paulina Palmer argues that it is these ‘emphatically sexual’ relations that make *Frost in May* a lesbian text.⁹⁷ But in labelling the novel in this way, Palmer does not fully engage with the way in which distinctions between masculine and feminine are distorted in the text. The gender identities of the girls are often confused. Leonie de Wesseldorf, a new arrival at the convent, is an exotic creature, half-French and half-German, but her femininity is obscured by Nanda when she imagines her as a ‘young prince, pale and weary from a day’s ride, with his lovelocks carelessly tied back in a frayed ribbon’ (p. 79). While Leonie is romanticised as a figure from a fairy tale, she is cast as the masculine hero rather than the damsel in distress. Nanda’s admiration for her friends tends to construct the female body as both masculine and feminine: Rosario has brows black and strongly marked’ with a nose that is ‘too masculine’ and a mouth that is ‘too wide’ (p. 107). Yet her femininity shines through this: her beauty ‘clung to her like a mist, like a skin’ so that ‘[e]verything she touched, every word she used, took on this quality of grace’ (p. 108). Consequently, the conceptualisation of sexual desire becomes more fluid and adolescent sexuality remains ambiguous.

The religious setting of the novel, however, obstructs the navigation of legitimate heterosexual desire. Life at the Convent of the Five Wounds means a denial of sexuality and bodily pleasure, and the novel repeatedly draws on food imagery as a metaphor for

⁹⁷ Pauline Palmer, ‘Antonia White’s *Frost in May*: A Lesbian Feminist Reading, in *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Susan Sellers, Linda Hutcheon and Paul Perron (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1991), pp. 89-108 (p. 90).

this. The meals served at the convent are basic, since the enjoyment of food is seen as a pathway to sin. As the nuns articulate:

‘If you give way to yourself in little things, you’ll give way to yourself in big ones later on. Perhaps one day when you are grown up, you’ll be faced with a really grave temptation ... a temptation to *mortal sin*’ (p. 27)

Over-eating and mortal sin are both signs of a lack of mastery over the body and its appetites. In contrast, fasting is presented as the path to virtue; Mother Guilleman, for example, is ‘so spiritual and so mortified that it was as if her body were glorified already and she would often eat nothing all day but the wafer at Holy Communion’ (p. 57). The purity of the female body is dependent upon sacrifice and denial, and it is literally starved. Food becomes a way of demonstrating one’s religious and sexual purity. In Confession one day, Nanda expresses a great fear that she will commit a mortal sin – namely, that she will break the vow of chastity she made when she was eight years old. When the priest absolves her from her vow, Nanda then begins a process of mortification through food, forcing herself to consume the food ‘she hated most to the very last scrap’ (p. 78). Nanda’s attitude conforms to the Catholic emphasis on the mortification of the flesh, but it also invokes the ‘virtue in distress’ motif that was popular in the sentimental fiction of the eighteenth century, whereby a heroine under sexual threat from an over-zealous suitor would attempt to retain control over the purity of her body through starvation.⁹⁸ The use of this motif aligns the Catholic denial of sexuality with patriarchal insistence on feminine purity, yet, ironically, it results in a denial of the heterosexual desire that patriarchy demands.

⁹⁸ R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novels of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

Despite Nanda's attempts to physically reject heterosexual desire, it informs and fuels her imagination. Her tendency to mythologise her female friends, to reimagine them as characters in a fairy tale, indicates how writing and narrative are used to flout the patriarchal strictures of the convent. Writing is seen as a site of contention in the novel; Nanda is reprimanded for reading *Dream Days* on the basis that its 'tone' is 'morbid, rather unwholesome and just a *little* vulgar', and the book is confiscated (p. 44). The reaction to texts which refer to romance or desire is even more extreme; when Mother Percival sees a reference to a 'girl's soft arms' and the 'horror of skin' in a poetry book Nanda is reading, she confiscates the book exclaiming that if she had her way it would be burnt (pp. 105-6). The power that texts hold is articulated by one of the nuns at a retreat later in the novel. As Nanda summarises to herself:

Bad books do untold harm. Writer responsible for evil his books do; he shares in every sin occasioned by it. Cannot go to heaven until book has ceased to harm [...]. Oscar Wilde must now be suffering for untold evil done by his books. (p. 131)

The mediation hints at a correlation between the sexual ideologies of a narrative and the sexuality of the author themselves.⁹⁹ It also demonstrates the fear of how literature can corrupt. These anxieties are reiterated in the text through Nanda's own writing. Her fiction focuses on the bohemian life; she progresses from her fascination with fairy-tales to writing a novel about 'a brilliant, wicked, worldly society, [...] composed of painters, musicians and peers', albeit with the aim of having her characters 'sensationally

⁹⁹ The reference to Oscar Wilde explicitly contextualises this transgression as sexual. The publication of *Salome* (1891), with its explicit references to homosexuality, was met with public outrage and the book was banned on the grounds of obscenity, but the prosecution case brought against Wilde focused on his own sexual identity. The suggested correlation between an author's sexuality and the fiction they produced would have held particular resonance for the contemporary readers of *Frost in May*, since the literary trial of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) had taken place only a few years earlier.

converted in the last chapter' (p. 158). Her novel is morally ambiguous; her hero frequents 'mysterious dens in Chinatown, from which he might be observed issuing in the early hours of the morning, still dazed with the fumes of strange narcotics' while her heroine's life is 'one giddy round of balls and flirtations' (p. 202). Nanda's writing becomes increasingly eroticised – one admirer 'swooned with [the heroine] in the languid ecstasies of a waltz' before taking her out onto the balcony where he 'pressed a kiss of burning passion on her scarlet mouth' (p. 202). Writing offers Nanda the chance to detach herself from her passionate female friendships, and align her herself with heterosexual desire, but the extent to which her fiction is eroticised is perhaps a critique of the way in which psychoanalysis has sexualised adolescence.

The exposure of Nanda's transgression allows the text to signal a triumph of patriarchal law. Upon the nuns' discovery of the manuscript, they send it to Nanda's father who quickly labels it 'disgusting and vulgar filth' and effectively disowns his daughter, declaring that 'if a young girl's mind is such a sink of filth and impurity, I wish to God that I never had a daughter' (p. 216). Mr Grey's recognition of his daughter's sexuality heralds the end of Nanda's childhood, as well as the end of her sexual transgression in terms of both her passionate friendships and her writing. Her realisation that '[n]ever, never could things be the same' removes the possibility of further resistance, and the text ends with Nanda allowing Mother Percival to 'guide her to the chapel door' (pp. 217-219). It is possible to read this as Nanda's submission to the patriarchal government of the convent. However, both Blanch and Andrea Peterson interpret the novel's ending differently. Peterson reads Mr Grey's threat to remove Nanda from the convent as a betrayal, since he allows her to believe her transgressions are

responsible for this, even though it appears that he is not financially able to keep his daughter at the convent.¹⁰⁰ Blanch, meanwhile, argues that Mr Grey ensures that Nanda ‘leave the enclosed female space of the convent, to return to the domestic order of the Father’s House’.¹⁰¹ While these readings all mark a conclusion to adolescent sexual development that suggests the negotiation of normative heterosexuality has been triumphant, the fact that Nanda has been punished for her fictional depictions of heterosexuality means this is still subject to constant policing and regulation.

Rosamond Lehmann’s *The Weather in the Streets* (1936)

The Weather in the Streets moves away from adolescent female sexuality, and instead focuses on the emotional journey of its adult protagonist, Olivia Curtis, during her affair with her married lover, Rollo Spencer. In many ways, Olivia fulfils the characteristics of the middle-class single woman who appears in novels throughout this time, enjoying a certain amount of independence and sexual liberation. Olivia shares a house with her cousin Etty, and moves into bohemian circles, mainly facilitated by her close friend Anna. The bohemian community connotes certain sexual freedoms; one of Etty’s friends, Mona, becomes interested in ‘the Bohemian life’ and has an affair with both a Russian count and an artist, following her divorce.¹⁰² Against this backdrop, the single woman remains vulnerable to sexual suspicion. When Olivia attends a party at the Spencers’ house, she and Marigold, Rollo’s sister, seclude themselves in a distant wing of the

¹⁰⁰ Andrea Peterson, ‘From White to Grey: A Psychoanalytical Approach to *Frost in May*’, *Working Papers on the Web: Children’s Literature*, 10 (2007) < <http://extra.schuh.ac.uk/wpw/childrens/Peterson.html> > [accessed 27 November 2009]

¹⁰¹ Blanch, ‘The Sacred Space of the “Mother-House”’, p. 126.

¹⁰² Rosamond Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* (London: Virago, 1981), p. 149. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

house. Marigold attempts to draw Olivia into discussing friendships with women, boldly asking Olivia if she knows any ‘what d’you call-em – Lesbians and things...’” (p. 106). Marigold’s exchange with Olivia appears sexually charged, with Marigold stroking Olivia’s hip with a ‘light clinging touch’ and declaring: “‘I bet if I were like that I’d make a pass at you’” (p. 106). Olivia, though, refuses Marigold’s advances, categorically stating “‘that’s not why my marriage didn’t work’” (p. 106). Marigold then suggests that Olivia embark on an affair with Rollo. Wallace proposes that this episode marks a ‘funnelling of potentially lesbian desire into a heterosexual relationship’.¹⁰³ While plausible, lesbian desire is here portrayed as a pastime, a diversion for the upper-classes. Disappointed by Olivia’s response, Marigold becomes ‘bored’ with her and leads them both back to the rest of the party (p. 107). Neither Olivia nor Marigold entertains lesbian desire as a serious possibility.

Nonetheless, the text continually problematises the relationship between the single woman and romantic convention. Having separated from her husband, Ivor, Olivia no longer belongs to the domestic sphere that her sister Kate is positioned in. In an exchange between the sisters, Olivia ruminates on having married her husband for love, and considers whether things may have turned out differently if she and Ivor had co-habited first. At Olivia’s suggestion that her sister may not have approved, Kate retorts:

‘I shouldn’t have cared what you’d done [...] The point is, *you* wouldn’t have approved of it. It’s no good pretending you were so frightfully unconventional and free-lovish – in those days anyway’. (p. 44)

The text suggests that Olivia has only broken away from convention and moved towards a more bohemian lifestyle following the breakdown of her marriage. However, Kate’s

¹⁰³ Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*, p. 116.

reference to pretence signals that bohemianism is not an authentic identity for Olivia. Indeed, Wallace suggests that ‘Olivia’s sense of fluid identity is the result of her ambiguous marital status’.¹⁰⁴ This ambiguity results from her refusal to formally divorce Ivor, despite the fact she recognises that the relationship is over. As Kate points out, even ‘the most broad-minded men are a bit – well, on their guard about a woman who’s legally married to some submerged person in the offing’ (p. 48). Implicit in Kate’s comment is concern over how female sexuality is delineated in the private and public spheres. Kate is shocked when Olivia informs her that she spoke with Ivor after unexpectedly meeting him out one night, questioning how she had dared to approach him ‘in a public place’ (p. 41). Her marriage to Ivor does not legitimise their conversation in a public place; rather, it makes it an indiscretion. Consequently, Olivia becomes the ‘other’ woman, both in her estrangement from her husband and in her affair with the married Rollo Spencer.

Deborah Parsons has argued that in Lehmann’s fiction we see a reworking of the correlation between the urban woman and the Victorian construction of the public woman as sexual deviant, since boundaries between ‘independence, respectability and public visibility have collapsed confusingly into each other’.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the flux of the city offers Rollo and Olivia the opportunity to appear in public as a couple. They regularly lunch in the same place on Mondays and Thursdays, with Olivia commenting that in the restaurant, their affair ‘came nearer being a public relationship, a reality in the world more than anywhere else’ (pp. 163-4). But Olivia recognises that their relationship can never achieve legitimate public status. The struggle has obvious class connotations.

Andrea Lewis observes in her essay on *The Weather in the Streets* that ‘[o]n one hand

¹⁰⁴ Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*, p. 175.

¹⁰⁵ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 146.

[...] Olivia rebels against middle-class values by rejecting marriage and children because she wants to guard her independence' but, on the other, her 'middle-class status is 'an ideal that Olivia fears will be compromised by her potential associations with lower-class indiscretion'.¹⁰⁶ These fears are only compounded by Rollo's aristocratic status. Instead of offering Olivia a legitimate space within the city, her affair with Rollo relegates her to the lower classes.

It also subverts the romantic convention that equates heterosexuality with reproduction. Rollo's marriage to Nicola is failing because of her inability to carry a pregnancy to term. Furthermore, it marks Nicola as an incapacitated female body. Nicola appears as a mixture of the hysteric and the neurasthenic, 'highly strung' and 'always having to take to her bed' (p. 75). As Marigold explains to Olivia:

'[Nicola] had a miscarriage once, quite an ordinary one, at least two years ago, and instead of going ahead and trying again she's decided she's an invalid – or her mother has [...]. I bet she's told Rollo that Nicola's too delicate to take any risks with and he mustn't go to bed with her'. (p. 103)

The relationship between Rollo and Nicola appears as a deficient form of heterosexuality. Even Olivia expresses surprise at Rollo and Nicola's childlessness: 'Couldn't, wouldn't Nicola? ... or what?' (p. 22). Olivia judges Nicola's status in the same way that her own childlessness is judged by others. When Olivia is discussing children with Mary, a friend of the Spencers, Mary's response is to look at Olivia's '[r]ingless hands, flat hips and stomach' and respond with 'cold, firm, amused gentleness, making allowances' (p. 94). Regardless of whether it is a single or married woman, the unproductive female body is scrutinised and viewed with suspicion. For the single woman, however, pregnancy does

¹⁰⁶ Andrea Lewis, 'A Feminine Conspiracy: Contraception, the New Woman and Empire in Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets*', in *Challenging Modernism: New Readings in Literature and Culture, 1914-45*, ed. by Stella Deen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 81- 96 (p. 84).

not automatically defuse this suspicion. When Olivia falls pregnant with Rollo's child, she expresses revulsion at the potential consequences, asking herself:

Is it a symptom, does it seal my fate?...The female, her body used, fertile, turning, resentful, in hostile untouchability, from the male, the enemy victorious and malignant...Like cats or bitches...Ugh! (p. 230)

For Olivia, pregnancy is isolating, and holds the potential to alienate Rollo. Her baby is illegitimate, and is both a cause and effect of her corruption of the heterosexual romance narrative. Her decision to abort the baby is the ultimate transgression of the maternal role.

Controversially, the novel presents abortion as both commonplace and understandable. Etty confesses to Olivia that she too has had an abortion, yet Olivia refuses to admit to Etty that she is pregnant, instead inventing an imaginary friend who is considering the operation. To admit to Etty her condition would be to '[e]nter into the feminine conspiracy, be received with tact, sympathy, pills and hot-water bottles, we're all in the same boat, all unfortunate women caught out after a little indiscretion' (p. 239). The 'unfortunate women' are cast as victims of a patriarchal order that demands they only conform to the reproductive impetus placed on them within the legitimate confines of marriage. Consequently, abortion renders the female body vulnerable. As Etty articulates: "these physical processes are too *treacherous*. Why should wretched females be so *beleaguered*?" (p. 238). The physical act of abortion is punitive towards the female body, and Olivia's illness following the procedure stands as a dire warning to those women who choose to undergo it. The illegality of abortion at this time also effectively criminalises the reproductive single woman. Still, Olivia's pathos is clear when she explains to Rollo when she informs him that she has aborted their child: "*I'm* the one to mind – I wanted it...you didn't. For you it would be just a tiresome mistake, but for me it

was a grief...so I must bear it by myself' (p. 327). The text would seem to affirm Olivia's argument. Andrea Lewis has claimed that abortion during this time 'had mostly lower-class associations'.¹⁰⁷ Thus, abortion compromises Olivia's class status, yet it paradoxically secures Rollo's by preventing him having an illegitimate child. Furthermore, Rollo's revelation that Nicola is now pregnant with his child means that the tidy lines of inheritance that the upper-class Spencers represent are secured.

Olivia's affair confounds the possibility of her claiming legitimacy and respectability in the romance narrative at every turn, yet its effect on Rollo is virtually non-existent. In Olivia's eyes, Rollo's infidelity only compounds his masculinity; as she recalls him remarking "*Everything* seems to come my way" she realises that he meant '[t]wo women in love with him. Two separate intimacies not overlapping at all, both successful: it was what he needed – what suited best his virility and secretiveness. It was all quite clear' (p. 342). What is unclear, though, is where Olivia can go from here. She breaks off her affair with Rollo when she discovers he has resumed sexual relations with Nicola, but when he is involved in a car crash, Olivia goes to visit him in hospital. Despite her insistence that her visit is a one-off, there is a suggestion that Rollo coerces Olivia into resuming their relationship; if we accept this sequence of events, then Olivia remains on the margins, part of the discourse of heterosexual desire, but unable to be part of the legitimate expression of it. At the same time, the text also intimates the possibility of Olivia setting up home with Anna. Existing on Anna's inheritance from her deceased lover, Simon, Olivia becomes financially secure despite her marginalisation, gaining the chance to maintain her autonomy despite her transgressions. The lack of resolution in the

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, 'A Feminine Conspiracy', p. 88.

novel offers the chance of emancipation for the single woman, but there remains a feeling that she may well be doomed to exist on the margins of the heterosexual order.

Conclusions

In her analysis of interwar women writers, Faye Hammill argues that authors such as Stella Gibbons and Margaret Kennedy often ‘raise questions about [...] oppositions between civilised and bohemian, realist and experimental’. The construction of these oppositions is indicative of a style that Hammill describes as broadly middlebrow.¹⁰⁸ I suggest that the novels discussed here are characterised by these, and a range of other, opposing ideologies between which the single woman is caught. Several of the novels I discuss here have been read by some critics as emblematic of feminine sensibility because of their perceived preoccupation with romance. My analysis uses the single woman to demonstrate how these novels actually subvert romantic convention. The female protagonists of these texts have an uneasy relationship with heterosexuality. Sydney calls off her engagement to Mr Milton in *The Hotel* for fear that it will oppress her, while Jane’s desire for George Playfair in *Devoted Ladies* seems largely an escape route from her tempestuous relationship with Jessica. Olivia’s relationship with the married Rollo Spencer in *The Weather in the Streets* is perhaps one of the more obvious disruptions of legitimate heterosexual desire, but her anxiety over their affair suggests there is more at stake here than reputation. Both Olivia and Jane are caught between single and married status: Jane’s widowhood means she can enjoy the financial freedoms of marriage without performing any domestic duties, while Olivia’s refusal to formally

¹⁰⁸ Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture*, p. 4.

divorce her husband Ivor marks her as sexually transgressive before she even embarks on an affair with Rollo. The inability of the single woman to sustain herself in a legitimate romance narrative suggests that the blurred categories of single woman make it increasingly difficult to her see as anything other than transgressive.

The radicalism of modernist texts has been in part ascribed to their engagement with lesbian aesthetics. In the texts I examine here, the transgression of the single woman is signalled by her involvement in lesbian relationships, but the potential subversion of lesbian desire never really materialises for her. In *The Hotel* and *Devoted Ladies*, the central female characters are embroiled in same-sex attachments, but both Sydney's relationship with Mrs Kerr and Jane's relationship with Jessica are perceived as unhealthy and destructive. As a satire, *Devoted Ladies* never allows the lesbian relationship to move beyond caricature. Nanda's passionate friendships in *Frost in May* are heavily eroticised, but she remains conflicted between her attachment to the other girls of the convent, and the Catholic insistence on the denial of female sexuality, whether it is heterosexual or homosexual. In *Saraband*, Louie might also spend her formative years in a female environment, but she remains largely within the confinements of the family structure, and her female friendships are not characterised by the same ardour as Nanda's are.

Instead, the radicalism of these texts lies in their refusal to reconcile the opposing ideologies of heterosexual and homosexual desire. Both form part of a narrative subtext that distorts the familial structures at the heart of heteronormativity. In *Saraband*, Louie rejects patriarchal structures by refusing to marry: the negotiation of her adolescent sexuality is simply part of her journey to construct her own subjectivity. The convent of

Frost in May could suggest maternal benevolence, but at the same time it seems to simply replicate patriarchal authority. Olivia aborts the illegitimate child she conceives with Rollo, and in doing so both punishes herself and criminalises the single woman. Sydney's relationship with Mrs Kerr points to a disruption of a mother-daughter relationship, but the triangular relationship that ensues between Sydney, Mrs Kerr and Ronald means that the family becomes a site of increasingly incestuous tension. These tensions are partly sustained by the domestic and bohemian ideologies that the texts present. In rejecting the domestic, Olivia in *The Weather in the Streets*, Jane in *Devoted Ladies* and Nanda in *Frost in May* are all associated with a bohemianism that is used as shorthand for transgressive sexuality. The bohemian world that Nanda writes of in *Frost in May* is characterised by moral ambiguity and heavily eroticised flirtations, and the reaction of both the nuns and her father to her novel signifies patriarchal anxiety over the containment of female sexuality. For Nanda, bohemianism is a fantasy, accessible only through her own imagination; for Jane, bohemianism is a metropolitan freedom, but one whose exaggeration renders it ludicrous. The artificiality of bohemianism is similarly emphasised in *The Weather in the Streets*, a contrivance adopted by Olivia to signal her departure from legitimate heterosexual desire.

Although I have linked the oppositions that I describe here with middlebrow culture, they might also suggest parallels with modernist culture. The issue of space, the question of where the single woman fits in, at a time when gender, class and geographical boundaries are collapsing into one another, shares an affinity with the fragmentation characteristic of modernist culture. The eponymous hotel of Bowen's novel, situated on the Italian Riviera, functions as a microcosm of English society, but its allegiances are

unclear. It is neither overtly rural nor urban. As a transient site, it cannot easily be assimilated into the domestic sphere, but at the same time the scrutiny that Sydney comes under suggests it does not tolerate deviation from it. Nanda leaves the confines of the domestic sphere for the Convent of the Five Wounds but, as Paulina Palmer suggests, its surveillance regime means that the convent acts a cipher for the patriarchal family unit. The city offers Olivia a space in which to have a semi-public relationship with Rollo, yet the illicitness of their affair means this only compounds her transgression and loneliness. The constant weighing of the sexuality and the subjectivity of the single woman marks the tight grip of the heterosexual narrative, but the creation of a legitimate space for the modern single woman to occupy seems little more than a fantasy: one which she appears doomed to chase. The reading of the search for space as a metaphorical search for subjectivity becomes much more pronounced in those works associated with modernist fiction, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

The ‘Selves’ of the Single Woman: Fiction and Modernism

Traditionally, the perceived innovators of literary modernism have, perhaps rather predictably, been male and predominantly Anglo-American. Authors such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis and James Joyce have been positioned as pivotal figures in the shaping of the modernist landscape and, indeed, in the formation of the English canon.¹ However, the recent shifts in the study of modernist culture, and the increasing emphasis on its plurality have led to the desire to understand, as Robert E. Scholes expresses it, ‘the full range of modernist literature and art in order to understand modernism’.² This has not only led to a re-evaluation of the insistence on literary modernism as one of the most elite and valuable expressions of the modernist aesthetic, but also to the consideration of forms of modernism previously relegated to its margins.³

This study is a continuation of that shift, particularly in its reconsideration of women’s writing in modernist culture. Deborah Parsons has pointed out how the gendered analysis of modernism has moved from the masculine to an exploration of the feminine,⁴ and this is evident in numerous accounts which have attempted to reposition the work of female authors as important subjects in discussions of literary modernism. Critics such as Shari Benstock, Bonnie Kime Scott, Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers have written on an array of British and American authors associated with

¹ Although Joyce is Irish, he has been co-opted into the category of British modernism.

² Robert E. Scholes, *Paradox of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 32.

³ This might include, for example, black modernist culture, such as the Harlem Renaissance of the 20s and 30s, or musical modernism.

⁴ Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5. This may well have resulted from changing conceptions of modernist culture. As indicated previously, Hussein’s *After the Great Divide* has equated the feminine with mass culture. The subsequent refiguring of modernism’s relationship to mass culture has thus enabled a reimagining of the feminine in both.

modernism. Yet none of these critics has sufficiently interrogated the very category that they position these writers in. Scott, for example, argues for a 'refiguring' of modernism, in which Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes and Rebecca West are repositioned as its central figures; although she acknowledges that the three authors had 'diverse attachments to the historical events, early canonised works, and theories that provided the tentative scaffolding of high modernism', she fails to elaborate on their potential mobility across cultural hierarchies.⁵ Benstock, meanwhile, is quick to highlight the marginality of these women in a movement she perceives as marked by 'misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Semitism', but in her efforts to illustrate how gender was 'an important (and all too often disregarded) element in defining the aesthetics and politics, the theory and practice' of modernism, she does not adequately engage with the contradictions and ambiguities in these modernist aesthetics, politics, theory or practice.⁶ Thus, while these studies challenge patriarchal, modernist paradigms, they primarily do so to elevate the literary status of female authors, rather than question the underlying notions of literary value and cultural capital that inform those paradigms.

Nonetheless, these studies have significantly enhanced our understanding of women's writings from the 1920s to the 1940s. They are part of a body of criticism that has concentrated on how texts by female modernist authors have engaged with representations of gender and sexuality, and transgressive sexuality in particular. However, the focus on the biographies of these writers and the interweaving of their life stories with the larger narrative of modernism itself, has, at times, overshadowed the

⁵ Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, 2 vols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), I, p. xxiv.

⁶ Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. x and p. 4.

textual ambiguities of their work. Writers from both sides of the Atlantic, including Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Anaïs Nin, Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Mina Loy, have come under scrutiny for their unconventional lifestyles, particularly in regards to their sexuality. Although some of these women were married, their relationships were far from orthodox, and all either had affairs with women or engaged in long-term lesbian relationships. Consequently, criticism of these writers' work has focused on the sexual identities of the characters, drawing analogies between the writers' lives and the lives of their protagonists.⁷ This is not to argue that there has been an absence of critiques which have offered sustained analysis at a textual level. But sustained *comparative* discussion of texts has been less frequent and while critics have been keen to map the shared experiences of these modernist writers in regards to their public and private lives, the same approach has not been taken with their literary works.

Instead, my work focuses on the textual, exploring common thematics across a selection of fiction. Modernism has typically been associated with the metropolitan, and female subjectivity has often been discussed in relation to its urban settings. In *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, Deborah Parsons takes the figure of the flâneur that has traditionally occupied the urban landscape in literature and reimagines a female equivalent in the form of the flâneuse. Parsons deftly argues that the modern city created the opportunity for new types of women to emerge – the New Woman, the shop girl, the female consumer – and enabled them to reclaim a space on the city streets. The study is both comprehensive and persuasive, and although Parsons does not explicitly

⁷ The relationship between autobiography and fiction is, of course, a complex one and I am certainly not arguing that this should not be interrogated in literary criticism. I do, however, suggest that a preoccupation with biography in women's writing of this period, especially in regards to modernist texts, has at times overshadowed other aspects of their work.

acknowledge it, the book serves as an analysis of the modern single woman, since the avenues that the city opens up for women are public ones that were not necessarily available to married women largely confined to the private sphere.

The emancipation of the single woman, though, is problematic given that the ‘new urban environment’ is one of a ‘fragmented and defamiliarised space’⁸ that denies her a coherent subjectivity. Accordingly, the single woman appears a haunted and troubled figure in the city streets. But part of this defamiliarisation process can be ascribed to the increasingly cosmopolitan city in the early years of the twentieth century. The relationship between cosmopolitanism and modernism has been explored, both in terms of the cosmopolitanism of modernist authors and networks, and in the way in which texts have engaged with race and national boundaries. The political and philosophical history of cosmopolitanism is a large and complex one, and there is not enough space here to discuss its intricacies. However, a consideration of its presence in the modernist tradition is valuable. As Rebecca L. Walkowitz observes, ‘public debates about privacy, intimacy, immigration, sexuality, education and marriage influenced modernist thinking about national boundaries and affiliations’.⁹ Since many of those debates also impacted on constructions of the single woman from the 1920s to the 1940s, it is perhaps inevitable that anxiety concerning shifting national boundaries did too. The term cosmopolitan, therefore, is rather broadly used in this study to denote a multiplicity of national identities that may contribute to the disorientation induced by the modern city, rather than encapsulating a particular ideology or philosophy. An awareness of the effects of

⁸ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 8.

⁹ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 11.

cosmopolitanism can allow for a more ambivalent reimagining of modernism's relationship with the city, especially since the association of modernism with modernity has been so closely tied to the metropolitan.

In order to interrogate the modernist contexts of the novels I have chosen to examine here, I have selected texts that have been associated with modernist narrative style. It would, however, be misleading to present such a style as uniform and homogenous. Considered an early proponent of the 'stream of consciousness' style, Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915-1967), with its epic exploration of the interior world of its protagonist, Miriam Henderson, is aligned with the work of Proust, Joyce and Woolf – although the text is more accessible than Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), say, or Woolf's *The Waves* (1931).¹⁰ Meanwhile, Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926) has some of the characteristics of a realist text, yet the shift in the story to fantasy enables it to be positioned within a modernist tradition. As Scott has argued, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* appears distinctly high modernist in style, combining elements of Jacobean tragedy, horror, Shakespearean and bawdy comedy, and was endorsed by T. S. Eliot.¹¹ Barnes herself has consistently been labelled modernist, and her other fictions such as *Ladies Almanack* (1924) and *Ryder* (1927) are similarly experimental. The three novellas that comprise Anaïs Nin's *Winter of Artifice* (1939-45) interweave the stories of various female protagonists in a narrative that draws on both modernist and surrealist

¹⁰ There was simply not enough room to consider the whole of *Pilgrimage* in this study. I have therefore chosen to focus on Volume Three of the text, which includes *Deadlock* (1921); *Revolving Lights* (1923); and *The Trap* (1925). As well as continuing its focus on Miriam's journey through the streets of London, these texts also address her relationship with the Russian student Shatov, allowing me to examine her position as a single woman in a romance narrative.

¹¹ Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, 1, p. xxiv.

techniques.¹² The relationship of these works to the modernist canon has varied.

Nightwood is perhaps the most canonical of the texts chosen, having emerged recently as a primary text on undergraduate programmes on both sides of the Atlantic. *Winter of Artifice*, by contrast, has rarely been discussed in studies of modernist fiction.¹³ While the first volume of *Pilgrimage* was well received upon publication, interest waned over the subsequent volumes. A more recent resurgence of interest resulted in sustained analysis of the text by critics including Jean Radford and Joanne Winning.¹⁴ Warner has tended to be discussed in relation to other interwar women writers, but these studies have emphasised her political activism and her lesbian sexuality as a means of assimilating her into modernist culture.¹⁵

All of the fictions discussed here are associated with lesbian aesthetics, partly because of the sexual lives of their authors, but also because of their depictions of lesbian desire. *Nightwood* has drawn particular interest for its central lesbian love story between Nora Flood and Robin Vote, and Jane Garrity has read *Lolly Willowes* as a fantasy of

¹² The publication history of this collection is rather complex. The original text, consisting of the stories 'Djuna', 'Lilith' and 'The Voice', was published in 1939. It was reprinted several times, but each edition used a different selection of stories. The edition that I use here was originally published by the Swallow Press in 1961, but the novellas it contains were all written during the 1930s and 40s. They are: 'Stella', which was originally published in *Ladders to Fire* (1945), 'Winter of Artifice', which was titled 'Lilith' in the first edition of *Winter of Artifice*, and 'The Voice', also taken from the first edition. I have selected this version of the text because the three novellas within it are especially illuminating for my project.

¹³ The text is briefly referred to in Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*, but there is little textual analysis.

¹⁴ Jean Radford, *Dorothy Richardson*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) and Joanne Winning, *The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

¹⁵ This shift can probably be attributed to Terry Castle's queer reading of Warner's *Summer Will Show*. The novel relates the story of Sophia Willoughby, who leaves for Paris to find her estranged husband, following the death of her two children. There she meets her husband's mistress, the revolutionary Minna, and embarks on an affair with her. See Terry Castle, ' Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction' in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd edn, ed. by Robin R. Warhol and Diane P. Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

lesbian desire.¹⁶ In Volume Four of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam becomes embroiled in a triangular relationship between Hypo Wilson and the beautiful Amabel, leading Joanne Winning to read the whole novel as subtextually lesbian. Both Lilith and Djuna in *Winter of Artifice* refer to erotic encounters with other women. The synonymy of female modernism with a lesbian aesthetic has been another method of sustaining modernism as radical form of literature, by aligning it with non-normative sexuality. It seems, however, that a fresh approach is needed. In focusing on lesbian desire, the broader ambiguities concerning the relationship between transgressive female sexuality and subjectivity have been overshadowed. Drawing on the theories of Luce Irigaray, Clare Hanson has argued that subjectivity:

has been identified with masculinity, singularity and a project of transcendence. By implication (especially in view of the reproductive capacities of the female body), feminine subjectivity can be conceptualised in terms of multiplicity/division and an acceptance of immanence and corporeality.¹⁷

Tracking the single woman in relation to gender conventions, constructions of sexuality and women's experience of modernity illustrates how her negotiation of subjectivity is characterised by the multiplicity and division that Hanson refers to. As a reproductive body, however, the single woman will always be marked as transgressive by heteronormativity, either by refusing to procreate, conceiving illegitimately, or abandoning the responsibilities of motherhood. Thus, the presumption that the sexual radicalism of women's modernist writing lies in its lesbian aesthetics can be modified.

¹⁶ Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The Woman's Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 14.

Section One: Authors

Djuna Barnes (1892 – 1982)

Of all the female modernist writers included in this study, Djuna Barnes is the most prolific, diverse, fabled, and critically discussed. She began her writing career in journalism, spending much of the 1910s producing articles for a host of American newspapers and magazines. Even these non-fictional roots display the signs of greatness, as Deborah Parsons enthuses:

Their combination of sharply satiric wit, knowing use of decadent symbolism and radical experimentation with form and genre [...] anticipate her distinctive concerns and burgeoning style. From the Bowery and the Bronx to the fashions and celebrities of Fifth Avenue and Broadway and the cultivated bohemianism of Greenwich Village, Barnes's articles critique and caricature the culture of New York society at the beginning of the century. Beneath their variously frivolous, investigative or satirical tone is a constant concern with issues of immigration, gender, popular culture and aesthetics, and an incisive analysis of the disjunction between the new and the abject in the city landscape.¹⁸

Parsons demonstrates how the articles produced in her early career allowed Barnes to experiment with an eclectic style of writing, drawing on a range of genres, an approach which she would develop in her fiction. Her first fictional release, *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915), was a collection of poems and illustrations, and she also wrote a series of one-act plays as part of the Provincetown Plays. Throughout the 1920s she wrote a number of short stories that appeared in periodicals such as *transatlantic review* and *Little Review*. Following relocation to Paris as part of her journalistic career, Barnes released both the bawdy comic novel *Ryder* and the satirical volume of poetry and illustrations, *Ladies Almanack*, in 1928. Although she continued to write journalistic articles and short stories, her next novel, *Nightwood*, did not appear until 1936, but it came to be regarded

¹⁸ Deborah Parsons, 'Djuna Barnes', in *The Literary Encyclopaedia*, 7 July 2001
<<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=266>> [accessed 19 February 2004]

as her magnum opus. Shortly afterwards Barnes suffered a nervous breakdown, and relocated back to New York, where she remained until her death in 1982. Her last major work was the drama, *The Antiphon* (1958).

In the current academic climate, the legacy of Barnes has been well-established. Erin G. Carlston has pointed to critical attempts that arose out of feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s to develop a female, modernist canon, expanding out from the masculine, patriarchal domination of the modernist forefathers of Eliot, Pound, Lewis and Joyce.¹⁹ These attempts have led to the incorporation of Barnes, alongside figures like Gertrude Stein and H. D., into discussions of high modernist aesthetics. The richness and diversity of Barnes texts has led to a plethora of critical studies in this area that have looked at her fiction in relation to race, Fascism, Jewishness, satire, gender and sexuality. Some of the most important and ground-breaking critical studies are those by Mary Lynn Broe, Jane Marcus, Deborah Parsons and Carolyn Allen.²⁰ There are recurring motifs across Barnes's fiction of rape, sapphism, the carnivalesque and transgressive bodies, which has led to an emphasis on gender and sexuality in critical accounts, and has cast Barnes as a key figure in the interwar lesbian modernist circle. Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*, Bonnie Kime Scott's *Refiguring Modernism* and Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers' *Writing For Their Lives*, while offering in-depth discussion of Barnes's texts, also focus on her biography. Given Barnes' life, this is perhaps somewhat

¹⁹ Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 2.

²⁰ See especially: Carolyn Alleyn, "Dressing the Unknowable in the Garments of the Known": The Style of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, in *Women and Language*, ed. by Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 106-18; Mary Lynn Broe, ed., *Silence and Power: A Re-evaluation of Djuna Barnes* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1991); Jane Marcus, "Laughing at Leviticus": *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic, in *Silence and Power: A Re-evaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), pp. 221-51; and Deborah Parsons, *Djuna Barnes* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2003).

inevitable: rumours of incestuous relationships with both her grandmother and her father, her tempestuous lesbian love affair with the artist Thelma Wood (who would provide Barnes with the inspiration for *Nightwood*), her struggles with money and alcohol, and her eventual, reclusive retreat following her return to America at the end of the thirties, have cemented Barnes's reputation as an iconic figure of the twentieth-century cultural scene.²¹

Parsons has stated that by 1923 Barnes was 'already a renowned figure amongst the expatriate literary community of the Left Bank'.²² Only a few years later her fiction began making waves. Benstock has argued that in the early years of her writing career, Barnes 'had refused to make any concessions to either publishers or the public in the choice of subject matter or style of her serious writing',²³ nonetheless, in a period when *The Well of Loneliness* had sparked outrage, censorship of potentially problematic texts seemed inevitable. Illustrations intended for her first novel, *Ryder*, were cut from the first edition, and several passages were also deleted, due to their bawdy subject matter. Scott details how Barnes' lesbian satire, *Ladies Almanack*, avoided prosecution by being privately published,²⁴ with the first fifty copies memorably being distributed by Barnes herself on the streets of Paris.²⁵ Her classic text, *Nightwood*, would also be subject to multiple revisions, under the guidance of Emily Holmes Coleman and T. S. Eliot. Eliot was instrumental in getting the novel published by Faber and Faber following Barnes'

²¹ Notable biographies of Barnes include: Andrew Field, *Djuna: The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985) and Phillip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking, 1995).

²² Parsons, *Djuna Barnes*, p. 1.

²³ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, p. 238.

²⁴ Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, 1, p. 250.

²⁵ Parsons, *Djuna Barnes*, p. 44.

own difficulties in placing it, and became Barnes' mentor and champion.²⁶ Considering the transgressive and often difficult material that Barnes produced, and her negotiation of publication obstacles in light of that transgression, it is unsurprising that so many studies have dealt extensively with her depictions of perversion and lesbian desire. Reintegrating *Nightwood* into a study of transgressive sexuality and cultural hierarchy can help establish connections outwith modernism, and situate the text in a heterodisruptive tradition, as well as a lesbian one.

Dorothy Richardson (1873 – 1957)

Dorothy Richardson is most well-known for her thirteen-volume sequence of novels collectively titled *Pilgrimage*. The ambitious project spanned much of her lifetime. The first 'chapter-novel',²⁷ *Pointed Roofs*, was published in 1915, and the subsequent volumes appeared across the following half-century. The majority appeared in relatively quick succession – *Backwater* (1916); *Honeycomb* (1917); *The Tunnel* (1919); *Interim* (1919); *Deadlock* (1921); *Revolving Lights* (1923); *The Trap* (1925); *Oberland* (1927); *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931); *Clear Horizon* (1935); *Dimple Hill* (1938) – but the final instalment, *March Moonlight*, was only published posthumously in 1967. The epic sequence of the novels tracks the life of the young, female protagonist, Miriam Henderson, on a voyage of self-discovery. Esther Kleinbord Labovitz points to how Richardson and the reading public became increasingly frustrated with the manner in

²⁶ Aaron Jaffe has written on the implications of Eliot's input into *Nightwood* in his book *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁷ The term Richardson herself used to describe her books.

which her work was released.²⁸ The protracted publication of *Pilgrimage* meant, as Parsons observes, that by the end of the 1920s interest in Richardson's work was beginning to wane, and that her 'audience were beginning to despair of Miriam's life ever reaching a conclusion (particularly when every long-awaited love interest or proposal seemed destined to be turned down)'. Difficulties were exacerbated when J. M. Dent republished all eleven chapter-novels together in one volume in 1938, adding the as-yet-unreleased twelfth chapter-novel *Dimple Hill*, so that 'readers understandably assumed that they had reach the final instalment'.²⁹

The emotional investment in Miriam's potential absorption into a romance narrative obscures the importance of Richardson's work in the burgeoning modernist scene. The early volumes of *Pilgrimage* were so critically appreciated for their experimentalism that by the early 1920s, Richardson was 'at the highpoint of her reputation as a pioneer of the new "psychological" novel'.³⁰ Indeed, *Pilgrimage* can be read as a feminist reworking of the roman-fleuvre tradition, owing to similarities with Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1922-31). The structuring and narrative techniques of *Pilgrimage* meant that the emphasis was placed on interior character monologue and female subjectivity, rather than action or plot. The sequence has since been acknowledged as instrumental in the development of stream-of-consciousness writing with the opening four chapter-novels predating the publication of James Joyce's

²⁸ Esther Kleinboard Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), p. 12.

²⁹ Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 9.

³⁰ Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel*, p. 9.

Ulysses (1922). The affinity between the two is apparent; *Interim* was even serialised in *Little Review*, the same avant-garde literary journal that was printing Joyce's *Ulysses*.³¹

Richardson has also, however, been integrated into studies of female modernist networks. She appears in studies of transatlantic, expatriate and British female modernist studies, including Gillian E. Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers' *Writing For Their Lives* and Jane Garrity's *Step-daughters of England*.³² In these studies, along with articles found in essay collections and periodicals, she is often analysed alongside writers such as Gertrude Stein, H. D. and May Sinclair.³³ The most frequent point of comparison, however, has been Virginia Woolf. Jean Radford has described Richardson as Woolf's 'sister-writer',³⁴ and, as Parsons points out, Woolf's debut novel *The Voyage Out* (1915) was published by Duckworth in the same year as the first instalment of *Pilgrimage*. Richardson, like Woolf, also published critical essays as means of funding her writing. As Joanne Winning has detailed, her writings and reviews appeared anonymously in the *Dental Record* and signed in the *Saturday Review*,³⁵ and she also contributed film reviews to *Close Up* from 1927 until 1933.

Although she lived in Bloomsbury and was acquainted with Woolf, the two were not close. Instead, Richardson's main literary friendships seemed to be with Eliot Bliss and Jean Rhys, yet while Richardson was celebrated early on, both Bliss and Rhys were

³¹ Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel*, p. 9.

³² Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

³³ See, for example: Howard Finn, 'Writing Lives: Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, Gertrude Stein', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. by Morag Shiach and Suzanne Hobson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 191-205; Sabine Vanacker, 'Stein, Richardson, and H. D.: Women Modernists and Autobiography', *Bête Noire*, 6 (1988), 111-123.

³⁴ Jean Radford, *Dorothy Richardson* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

³⁵ Joanne Winning, *The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 32.

largely ignored in their contemporary climates. Although Richardson is referred to in female modernist studies, there is less consistent engagement with her work than with that of her peers. This may well be because of an emphasis within these works on lesbian, modernist aesthetics (Richardson, by contrast, married the artist Alan Odle in 1917 and her affair with H. G. Wells has been well documented). Certainly her life has played a major part in critical evaluation of her work, with *Pilgrimage* being read as an autobiographical text. Accordingly, there was a spate of biographies of Richardson during the 1970s by writers including Thomas F. Staley and John Rosenberg.³⁶

Pilgrimage indeed draws largely on the years of Richardson's own life between 1890 and 1912. Given that the majority of the texts were written during the interwar years and were speaking to a much earlier time, Richardson has been viewed as something of a transitional writer.³⁷ Joanne Winning argues that 'Richardson and her unwieldy work have for years been neglected' because of 'the gender inflections of literary critical thinking, and because her work has often been misread or not read at all'.³⁸ However, the first part of this claim does not ring entirely true, and the latter part of it is somewhat misleading: although it is true that her work has not been recuperated in the same way as other female modernists, a search on the MLA bibliography brings up hundreds of references to criticism on Richardson, looking at a broad range of issues including gender, sexuality, religion and aesthetic practice. Critics such as Parsons, Jean Radford, Kristin Bluemel and Winning herself have all made important contributions to existing

³⁶ See Thomas F. Staley, *Dorothy Richardson* (Boston: Twayne, 1976); John Rosenberg, *Dorothy Richardson: The Genius They Forgot: A Critical Biography* (London: Duckworth, 1973).

³⁷ Labovitz concentrates on *Pilgrimage* as an example of the development of twentieth-century female bildungsroman; Kristin Bluemel has also read the text as on the borders of modernism: see Kristin Bluemel, *Experimenting on the Borders of Modernism: Dorothy Richardson's 'Pilgrimage'* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

³⁸ Winning, *Pilgrimage*, p. 9.

Richardson scholarship that has resisted reading her exclusively through the lens of a distinctly female modernism. It is possible that while the early works of Richardson were hailed for their progressiveness, there were a host of literary modernists making waves by the end of the twenties; therefore the continuation of her sequence of novels accrued much less cultural capital in this climate. This study, by focusing on the sections of Richardson's text written by the time her interest in her was declining, repositions *Pilgrimage* as part of a female modernist dialogue concerning the single woman.

Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893 – 1978)

When Sylvia Townsend Warner's collection of poetry, *The Espalier*, was published in 1925, it marked the start of a literary career that would include poetry, children's fiction, short stories and a series of novels. The majority of the novels appeared in the interwar years: *Lolly Willowes* was published in 1926, and was quickly followed up with *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927) and *The True Heart* (1929). In the 1930s she published *Summer Will Show* (1936) followed by *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938). It was another ten years before her next novel, *The Corner That Held Them* (1948), was published, and this was followed by *The Flint Anchor* (1954). She also penned a selection of children's stories that were collected in *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977).

All of Warner's novels were published by Chatto & Windus in the UK and The Viking Press in the US. Both were well-respected literary publishing firms at this time. Established in 1925, Viking's founding creed was '[t]o publish [...] distinguished fiction with some claim to permanent importance rather than ephemeral popular interest' and other authors on their books during this early period included Vita Sackville-West and

Bertrand Russell.³⁹ Despite backing from such major publishing companies, the reception of Warner's work was varied. Her first novel *Lolly Willowes* was successful on both sides of the Atlantic, but her subsequent fiction less so; her sporadic production of novels, along with her burgeoning relationship with the poet Valentine Ackland and their well-documented political activism, may have had a detrimental effect on her popularity. Harman observes that during 'the nine years between the publication of *Mr Fortune's Maggot* and *Summer Will Show*, Sylvia had gradually fallen out of the public view, and she was never fashionable again, though she always had appreciative readers and sold reasonably well'.⁴⁰ Although Warner did enjoy a moderate level of success, the literary value of her novels was more debated, particularly in the UK. In the US, she fared much better. The success of *Lolly Willowes* – its favourable reviews from respected critics such as Alexander Woollcott and Christopher Morley, and its selection for the Book-of-the-Month-Club – meant that by the time Warner visited New York in 1929 she had become something of a celebrity, and was befriended by eminent personalities such as Dorothy Parker and Elinor Wylie.⁴¹ Furthermore, the acceptance of Warner's short story 'My Mother Won the War' by the *New Yorker* in 1936, and the subsequent 144 stories she published in the magazine, meant that she retained her literary currency stateside.⁴²

In Britain, the publication of the fantasy novel *Lolly Willowes* did situate Warner in modernist circles. Following the novel's success, she was invited to dine with Virginia Woolf, and became part of a lively London scene, even if she 'had developed an aversion

³⁹ 'The Viking Press' <<http://us.penguin.com/static/pages/publishers/adult/viking.html>> [accessed 29 November 2009]

⁴⁰ Clare Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 157.

⁴¹ Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, pp. 84-5.

⁴² Ben Yagoda, *The New Yorker and The World It Made* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 2000), p. 160.

to parties'.⁴³ By the 1930s, however, she had met Ackland, and the two relocated to the Dorset countryside, geographically manoeuvring themselves away from the Bloomsbury set. Warner's peripherality in modernism has led to a divide in criticism on her, and her fiction is explored in relation to both realist traditions and modernist aesthetics. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the stylistic diversity of her fiction. Harman argues that there is 'remarkably little consistency – except in a prevailing intelligence – between one of her novels and the next, a fact which partly explains why she has escaped the close attention of literary critics'.⁴⁴ The observation is true to a certain extent: for instance, the fantastical allegory of *Lolly Willowes* has little in common with the fourteenth-century Norfolk community depicted in *The Corner That Held Them*. However, the collapsing of the realist/modernist binary in recent criticism, has led to a more dynamic exploration of the interplay between different narrative techniques in Warner's fiction. Terry Castle's groundbreaking study of *Summer Will Show* moves the text outside the usual category of historical fiction, and instead emphasises it as a lesbian novel.⁴⁵ Jane Garrity's writing on *Lolly Willowes* continues analysis of Warner's lesbian aesthetic, identifying a tension between her deconstruction of heterosexual norms and use of 'conservative prose'.⁴⁶ Garrity's analysis has echoes of Castle's reading, citing Warner's experimental style of writing – in this case, her blending of 'satirical fantasy, social realism, allegory and literary allusion' – as a strategy for disguising the novel's sexually transgressive

⁴³ Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 175.

⁴⁵ Terry Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and The Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd edn, ed. by Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 532-54 (p. 547)

⁴⁶ Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 148.

elements.⁴⁷ Castle and Garrity, along with Wachman, have used these transgressive motifs to contextualise Warner within lesbian, modernist aesthetics.⁴⁸

Anaïs Nin (1903 – 1977)

In 1961, Anaïs Nin approached the US publisher Alan Swallow to enquire if he would be interested in putting out some of her work. Since beginning her writing career in the 1930s, Nin had faced continuing difficulties in securing publishers. Disillusioned by the process, she wrote to Gunther Stuhlman ‘I really can’t go on writing and locking it up in a drawer’.⁴⁹ Swallow was an independent, Denver-based company but one which Nin admired for having published *Victorine* (1959).⁵⁰ Nin was therefore relieved and flattered when Swallow agreed to republish five of her titles (*Ladders To Fire*, *Children of the Albatross*, *The Four-Chambered Heart*, *A Spy in the House of Love* and *Solar Barque*) under the collective title of *Cities of the Interior*. An advert appeared in *Publishers Weekly* in 1962, with the headline ‘Nin Rediscovered in Denver’. The claim proved to be a non-starter – the series sold poorly, and the royalty contract that Nin had signed earned her the unspectacular sum of \$32.60.⁵¹

This lack of both commercial and critical success was indicative of the disappointments Nin routinely faced throughout her literary career. Difficulties finding publishers, poor sales and a lack of sustained critical discussion of her work have prevented her from acquiring a serious literary reputation. Yet by the 1970s, in the years

⁴⁷ Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, pp. 148-51.

⁴⁸ Gay Wachman, *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ Deidre Bair, *Anaïs Nin: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 449.

⁵⁰ This controversial novel by the British author Maude Hutchins detailed the sexual awakening of its thirteen-year old heroine, and drew comparisons with novelists such as Ivy Compton-Burnett and Colette.

⁵¹ Bair, *Anaïs Nin*, p. 451.

before her death, Nin had become a darling of the lecture circuit, receiving regular invitations to speak at universities across the US. The public life of Anaïs Nin – colourful, scandalous, at times immoral and always infused with sexual experimentation – had secured her a different kind of reputation. Speaking about her life and her experiences of writing led to the recuperation of Nin as a feminist icon. Disappointingly, this has not led to enough of a critical re-examination of her work, and studies have remained preoccupied with her biography, rather than with her fiction. Deidre Bair suggests this has been exacerbated by the way in which ‘her original writings have been withheld from scholars, thus impeding, if not making impossible, legitimate, critical inquiry’.⁵² It has also obstructed the tracking of Nin’s publication history. Because of the difficulty in achieving publication, Nin often worked on her fiction for years, copiously reediting and redrafting novels and stories, sometimes splitting them into separate works, sometimes joining sections together, before again trying to promote her work, occasionally under new titles. Low sales meant that there was often only one print run, with revised editions of her work being published some years later. Inevitably, a coherent picture of Nin’s publication record has yet to emerge.

Shari Benstock ascribes the lack of interest in Nin’s work to her ‘subject and style ‘which was ‘clearly at odds with the predominant literary mood of the thirties and was misunderstood by the publishers and literary agents who examined it’.⁵³ The first piece of fiction she had published was *House of Incest*. At first tentatively titled ‘Alarune’, Nin began writing this surrealist prose poem around 1933. When she showed what would be the final manuscript (still called ‘Alarune’) to friends and family, they showed ‘distaste

⁵² Bair, *Anaïs Nin*, p. 518.

⁵³ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, p. 430.

for her “decadent style” and “confusing story”.⁵⁴ Stung by their criticisms, she was still rewriting the piece when she began approaching publishers, including Kahane (who agreed to publish it if she would provide the funds to do so); she also sent a copy of the novel to Rebecca West, who she hoped might be able to secure her a deal at Jonathan Cape, but to no avail. *House of Incest* was eventually published in 1936, ostensibly by Nin herself, with the help of her friend Michael Fraenkel. It was not particularly well received, and according to Bair, there were relatively few reviews. She again, therefore, had difficulty placing her follow-up, *Winter of Artifice*, with a publisher. The collection of three novellas was eventually released in 1939, but it went largely unnoticed. Understandably disillusioned with the publication process, Nin, along with Henry Miller, turned to writing erotica by commission for a mysterious client known only as ‘the Collector’.⁵⁵ Although she would eventually also turn to the lecture circuit as a means of supplementing her income and increasing her visibility as a writer, it was not until the 1966 publication of her diaries that her writing gained any public or critical recognition. As Deidre Bair observes: ‘[t]he literary world, having ignored Anaïs Nin for the past quarter century, suddenly perked up, and the attention she craved all those years descended in a deluge’.⁵⁶ The attention was perhaps unsurprising: the sexual revolution of the 1960s meant that Nin’s exploits – her affairs with Henry Miller, his wife June, Gore Vidal and countless others – made for fascinating reading. The next logical step was the

⁵⁴ Bair, *Anaïs Nin*, p. 193. Their comments seemed to reflect the view of the publishers that Nin approached.

⁵⁵ Bair details how Miller and Nin believed ‘the Collector’ to be a New York book dealer called Barnett Ruder. Nin based her erotic writings on her own sexual exploits as detailed in her diaries. See Bair, *Anaïs Nin*, pp. 261-2.

⁵⁶ Bair, *Anaïs Nin*, p. 479.

publication of the erotica she had written during the forties, which were collected under the titles of *Delta of Venus* (1978) and *Little Birds* (1979).

Nin's erotica has been the subject of critical praise; nevertheless, her private life had, until relatively recently, continued to obscure her contribution to fiction. Even with the recent movement to reclaim female modernists for academic discussion, Anaïs Nin has been curiously left out of the majority of studies. There is no reference to her in Hanscombe and Smyers' *Writing For Their Lives*, and only passing references are made to her in Scott's *Refiguring Modernism*. She is certainly absent from the less gender-specific modernist studies. Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* does, however, engage in a detailed discussion of Nin's fiction, with an adept reading of *House of Incest*.⁵⁷ Nin is also included in Parsons' *Streetwalking the Metropolis*.⁵⁸ The lack of reference to Nin in modernist studies may partly be due to her geographical and biographical marginalisation from female modernist circles. Although Nin was resident in Paris in the 1920s, she did not play any part in the female literary salons run by Natalie Barney; instead, she acted as a benefactor for numerous male writers and artists including Henry Miller. The major influences she cited were male: Gide, Proust, Miller and Lawrence. She did become friends with Rebecca West, but although she professed a great admiration for Djuna Barnes, Barnes refused to respond to Nin's attempts to cultivate any personal or professional relationship.

Helen Tookey has gone as far as to suggest that Nin has been neglected as a modernist writer because the publication of her fiction does not fit into the usual

⁵⁷ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, pp. 430-5.

⁵⁸ See Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, pp. 149-87.

modernist parameters.⁵⁹ However, given that Nin's work was often published long after it was actually written, this explanation seems problematic. In terms of writing style, Nin's relationship to modernism has been more rigorously examined. Her prose style is often difficult and obscure, and has attracted criticism. Certainly *House of Incest* is indebted to surrealist influences. Anne T. Salvatore's collection, *Anaïs Nin's Narratives*, offers sustained analysis of both Nin's fiction and diaries that explicitly considers her role in the field of literary modernism.⁶⁰ Both Philippa Christmass and Maxie Wells read Nin's writing as a precursor to *écriture féminine*, with Wells more decisively situating Nin between a formal and feminist modernism.⁶¹ In light of these writings, it then seems apt to consider Nin's texts as part of a continuum of modernist aesthetics concerning female subjectivity, rather than attempting to position her squarely in modernist culture.

Section Two: Textual Analysis

Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (Volume Three, 1921-5)

Pilgrimage has often been seen as a fictionalisation of Richardson's own experiences as a single woman living in London during the early twentieth century. Esther Kleinbord Labovitz has described the novel's protagonist, Miriam, as a New Woman, implicitly aligning her with the progressiveness of the modern city and unconventional sexuality.⁶²

⁵⁹ Helen Tookey, *Anaïs Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 3.

⁶⁰ Anne T. Salvatore, ed., *Anaïs Nin's Narratives* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

⁶¹ See Philippa Christmass, "'Dismaying the Balance": Anaïs Nin's Narrative Modernity', in *Anaïs Nin's Narratives*, ed. by Anne T. Salvatore (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), pp. 189-212 and Maxie Wells, 'Writing the Mind in the Body: Modernism and *Écriture Féminine* in Anaïs Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love* and *Seduction of the Minotaur*', in *Anaïs Nin's Narratives*, ed. by Anne T. Salvatore (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), pp. 213-251.

⁶² Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986).

Certainly, in many of her interior monologues, Miriam questions the delineation of gender spheres. In *Deadlock* she observes:

Men fight about their philosophies and religions, there is no certainty in them; but their contempt for women is flawless and unanimous [...] positive and negative, north and south, male and female...why *negative*?⁶³

Miriam's words prefigure the French feminist theories of the 1970s that highlighted gender hierarchies. Miriam's modernity and her radicalism lie in her desire to erase this power structure. When the Russian student, Shatov, asks Miriam if she considers 'that wife and mother is the highest position of woman', Miriam asserts that it 'is neither high nor low. It may be anything' (*Deadlock*, p. 222). Miriam directly challenges the rigidity of binary structures, and instead points towards a more fluid conception of femininity. Furthermore, she refutes Shatov's argument that 'women themselves' buy into this idea since the 'majority find their whole life in these things', arguing '[t]hat is a description, from outside, by men. When women use it they do not know what they say' (*Deadlock*, p. 222). The traditions of the private domestic sphere are implied to be antithetical to the modern female subject who, as we see as the text progresses, stakes her claim to a more public life.

Miriam's suspicion of marriage, and its regulation of the domestic sphere, means heterosexual intimacy becomes intrinsically problematic. She begins an affair with Shatov, but she eventually breaks it off, musing:

This was man; leaning upon her with his burden of loneliness, at home and comforted. This was the truth behind the image of woman supported by man. The strong companion was a child seeking shelter; the women's share an awful loneliness. It was not fair. (*Deadlock*, p. 212)

⁶³ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, (London: Virago, 1979), III, p. 51. All further references are to this edition and individual novel titles are given parenthetically in the text.

The irony of this maternalised femininity is that it emasculates men, since it is the maternal figure that assumes the role of masculine protector and provider. The 'loneliness' that Miriam refers to, however, takes on a double meaning, representative of both the estrangement she feels from another and the estrangement she feels from herself:

This was marriage, thought Miriam [...]. Tragedy; the beginnings, before its dry-eyed acceptance, of womanly tragedy, the loss of self in the procession of unfamiliar unwanted things. In the company of a partner already re-immersed in his own familiar life. (*The Trap*, p. 459)

The tragedy is not merely the 'loss' of the self, but the 'dry-eyed' acceptance of it. For Miriam, marriage is a threat to her autonomy and her subjectivity, but for Shatov it offers 'home', a space in the domestic sphere and, in addition, a chance to erase his foreignness. The construction of the domestic sphere as the legitimate and proper place for women is inverted: in becoming 'unfamiliar', it is also constructed as foreign, and so the narrative plays with ideologies of cosmopolitanism, disturbing the delineation of both gender and nation.

The 'otherness' of the Russian Shatov in the narrative means that, in his presence, Miriam can belong to the metropolitan, rather than be excluded from it. When a group of men on the street see Miriam and Shatov walking together and shout out xenophobic insults, Miriam confronts them, planning to inform them how 'abominable and simply *disgraceful* their insults are' (*Deadlock*, p. 138). When she demands that they explain themselves, one responds: "“Miss, we know the sight of you going up and down Miss, he ain't good enough *forya*”" (*Deadlock*, p. 138). His response leaves Miriam 'speechless' and she thinks to herself: 'In all these years of invisible going up and down...'
(*Deadlock*, p. 138). Jean Radford argues that Miriam reclaims a space on the city streets that is usually only 'free to men and prostitutes', implying that as a single woman her

sexual reputation is vulnerable.⁶⁴ Yet oddly, in this scene, Miriam can appear to hold a legitimate place because Shatov's 'otherness' eclipses her own. Miriam's familiarity is constructed in opposition to Shatov's unfamiliarity, and her position on the city street is legitimised.

The novel simultaneously seeks to expunge this opposition by emphasising the similarities between Miriam and Shatov. Miriam observes: 'Most people, all the time, in every relationship, seek only themselves. Past selves, if they are old' (*The Trap*, p. 464). The negotiation of female subjectivity is inherently narcissistic but, at the same time, marriage could well offer Miriam the chance to find her 'self' in Shatov. Her description of Shatov as 'the man who knew her thoughts' would seem to support this (*Deadlock*, p. 192). But the construction of the self is problematised, and the expression of narcissistic love is inevitably a site of conflict. The morning after Shatov kisses her, Miriam stands in front of a mirror to finish dressing herself before going outside, while Shatov stands nearby, waiting:

The woman facing her in the mirror as she put on her hat was the lonely Miriam Henderson, unendurably asked to behave in a special way [...]. How to turn and face him and get back through the room and away to examine alone the surprises of being in love? Her image was disconcerting, her clothes and the act of rushing off to tiresomely engrossing work inappropriate. It was paralysing to be *seen* by him struggling with a tie. The vivid colour that rushed to her cheeks turned her from the betraying mirror to the worse betrayal of his gaze. (*Deadlock*, p. 194)

In front of her lover, Miriam must perform as in a romance narrative and position herself as subject of the male gaze. There is a disconnection between Miriam and the image she sees reflected back at her. If Miriam's love for Shatov is narcissistic, and if he is an extension of her self, then Shatov is not simply a mirror reflecting thoughts back to

⁶⁴ Radford, *Dorothy Richardson*, p. 53.

Miriam; instead, he is constitutive of them. Radford has suggested that Miriam's eventual refusal to marry Shatov, while influenced by her fears of subordination, is largely due to Shatov's confession to a previous sexual experience with a prostitute.⁶⁵ Radford does, however, remain troubled by her own interpretation, admitting confusion over Miriam's professions of 'treachery' following Shatov's confession, before offering several psychoanalytic explanations for it. I propose that the problem that Radford cannot quite identify is Miriam's belief that Shatov's confession delegitimises the space Miriam has forged for herself on the city streets by aligning her with the tainted urban archetype of the prostitute. Thus to marry Shatov would be an act of treachery against her 'self' and her eventual rejection of him becomes emblematic of her attempt to reclaim her subjectivity.

The urban landscape proves crucial in staking out a space in which Miriam can do this. Rejecting the domestic sphere, Miriam turns to the city streets:

Tonight the spirit of London came to meet her on the verge. Nothing in life could be sweeter than this welcoming [...]. What lover did she want? No one in the word would oust this mighty lover, always receiving her back without words, engulfing and leaving her untouched, liberated and expanding to the whole range of her being. (*Revolving Lights*, p. 272)

Reconstructed as a lover, the city replaces heterosexual desire and offers the single woman liberation. At the same time, the city's engulfment of her suggests this liberation is not entirely unproblematic:

The street was opening out into a circus. Across its broken lights move the forms of people, confidently, in the approved pattern of life, and she must go on, uselessly, unrevealed; bearing a resemblance that was nothing but a screen set up hiding what was in the depths of her being. (*Revolving Lights*, p. 289)

For Deborah Parsons, Miriam exhibits the elusive and fleeting qualities of the passante.

⁶⁵ Radford, *Dorothy Richardson*, p. 98.

She argues that the city streets allow Miriam to ‘discover an identity and selfhood through wandering’: an identity previously not available to urban women.⁶⁶ Although I would concur with Parsons’ view that the urban landscape is interiorised by Miriam, who appears at times as a rather abstract figure, Parsons does not acknowledge the ways in which the city dwarfs and isolates Miriam. Furthermore, her use of the term ‘discover’ does not convey the extent to which Miriam actively attempts to construct her selfhood.

The tension between the city and the self is implicit in Labovitz's description of Richardson as a ‘transitional literary figure in the evolution of the female bildungsroman’.⁶⁷ Like Parsons, Labovitz emphasises the role of the city, arguing that ‘common to both the female heroine and the male hero of the bildungsroman is the movement from the provinces to the urban centre’.⁶⁸ Both Labovitz and Parsons privilege the urban as the site in which the modern woman can forge her own subjectivity. In *Pilgrimage*, the street becomes privy to the ‘the whole range’ of the single woman’s being, even the ‘beloved hated secret self’ of Miriam (*Revolving Lights*, p. 289). Despite *Pilgrimage*’s continued allusion to Miriam’s anxiety about her need to camouflage herself, she remains compelled to strive for her own subjectivity:

I must create my life. Life is creation. Self and circumstances the raw material.
But so many lives I can’t create. And in going off to create my own I must leave
behind uncreated lives. Lives set in motionless circumstances. (*The Trap*, p. 508)

Miriam transforms the paradigm of woman as creator of life into a model of subjectivity.

The city, therefore, functions as both a physical and imaginary landscape in which the single woman can create herself. But the reading of *Pilgrimage* as a bildungsroman

⁶⁶ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, pp. 73-9. The literal translation of the term *passante* is ‘passer-by’, but Parsons positions it as ‘one female alternative to the public urban observer of the *flâneur*’ (p. 73).

⁶⁷ Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, p. 23.

implies her journey of development has an end, a 'coming-of-age.' Jesse Matz argues that the novel 'maintains that ambivalence about "being-versus-becoming", rather than moving onto next questions or theoretical frameworks'.⁶⁹ For Matz, Miriam's 'exclusively inner life undergoes no essential change', and thus she is able to 'give us a myriad of selves all throughout, along with an "innermost" part that is a centre which can hold'.⁷⁰ Miriam, therefore, creates her life, or lives, or even her different selves from a self that is already the 'raw material'. Consequently, the London streets become a witness to her selves, rather than a constituent of them, and the text questions how the city has been privileged as the site for forging modern female subjectivity.

Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926)

The relationship between the city and subjectivity, as well as the modernist emphasis on the retreat from the rural and the provincial to the modern city, is reworked by Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes*. The text opens in the last years of the nineteenth century. The unmarried Laura Willowes must remain within the family home until a suitor can be secured for her. The loss of her mother at a young age and the later death of her father mean that Laura's single status becomes increasingly problematic. The twenty-eight year-old Laura's chances of finding a match have decreased considerably, raising concern about a domestic space for her. The prospect of Laura setting up home herself does not occur to her family: 'Her father being dead, they took for granted that she should

⁶⁹ Jesse Matz, 'Dorothy Richardson's Singular Modernity', *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 1 (2008) <<http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/en/richardson/pilgrimages/issue1/Matz.pdf>> [accessed 13 September 2010], 8-26 (p. 17). Matz is one of several critics to comment on the symbolism of Miriam's name - a play on 'myriad "I am's"'.
⁷⁰ Matz, 'Dorothy Richardson's Singular Modernity', pp. 13-8.

be absorbed into the household of one brother or the other'.⁷¹ Accordingly, she remains under patriarchal control, and her subjectivity is threatened by the discourse of primogeniture which constructs her as 'a piece of family property forgotten in the will' (p. 6). Despite the parade of suitors that the family invite over to dinner, a marriage proposal never materialises. Ironically, this can be largely attributed to Laura's position in the family structure. Her mother's death means Laura must be 'subdued into young ladyhood' and her mourning prevents her from experiencing 'the conventional polite uproar and fuss about "coming out"' (p. 18). Her close relationship with her father proves a further obstacle to marriage:

her upbringing had only furthered a temperamental indifference to the need of getting married [...]. There is nothing more endangering to a young woman's normal inclination towards young men than an intimacy with a man twice her own age. Laura compared with her father all the young men whom otherwise she might have accepted without any comparisons whatever as suitable objects for her intentions, and she did not find them to support the comparison at all well [...]. She had no mind to quit her father's company for theirs. (p. 26)

The intimacy between Laura and her father is not eroticised, and instead her preference for her father's company desexualises her. The novel draws on the image of the old maid to marginalise Laura from heterosexual desire.

Laura's single status causes anxiety amongst her surviving family, and it is thought that moving to London will improve her prospects of finding a suitor. A pre-World War One London does not offer Laura the same financial and sexual freedoms as it does the single woman during the twenties and thirties, and instead represents the desire to retain Laura within patriarchal structures. Although life in London 'is full and exciting' Laura continues to yearn for the country throughout her twenty years in the city (pp. 4-5).

⁷¹ Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowses* (London: Virago, 2007), p. 6. All references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

She laments the absence of ‘the greenhouse with a glossy tank’ and the ‘potting-shed [...] with bunches of poppy heads hanging from the ceiling’ (p. 4). Laura’s love for the rural and the natural world is profound and marked by mysticism. She consults the natural world as though it were an oracle: when she buys some chrysanthemums which she finds have originated from the Chilterns, Laura believes that she now knows ‘all that she wanted to know’ and that her ‘course lay clear before her’ (p. 86); upon purchasing a guidebook to the Chilterns, she decides to move to the village of Great Mop. Jane Marcus views Laura’s love for the countryside as symptomatic of her desire to return to a prelapsarian and pre-patriarchal environment.⁷² Laura does not enjoy rural idylls, however, and instead she is drawn to the qualities ‘hinted at by the sound of water gurgling through deep channels and by the voice of birds of ill-omens’ – namely, ‘[I]oneliness, dreariness, aptness for arousing a sense of fear, a kind of ungodly hallowedness’ (p. 77). The primitivism and darkness that the countryside encapsulates, at least for Laura, seems at odds with the innocence of a prelapsarian world.

Instead, the rural sphere offers Laura the chance to refigure her position within patriarchal structures. Her enthusiasm for botany and brewery means she spends her time outside searching for ‘herbs and simples’ and the novel details the ‘washes and decoctions’ she makes ‘from sweet gale, water purslane, cowslips and the roots of succory’ (p. 31). In this sense, Laura transforms the reproductive function of the female body by aligning herself with the fertility of nature, so that the countryside becomes integral to Laura’s creation of her new identity. Having made her decision to move to

⁷² Jane Marcus, ‘A Wilderness of One’s Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner’, in *Women Writers and the City*, ed. by Susan Merrill Squier (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp. 134-60.

Great Mop, nothing can deter her from doing so, not even her brother's revelation that he has lost a large portion of the family income because of unsound financial investments; as Laura observes to herself: 'It is best as one grows older to strip oneself of possessions, to shed oneself downward like a tree, to be almost wholly earth before one dies' (p. 106). Laura distances herself from the economic dependence of the Edwardian single woman on a system of patrilinealism and primogeniture, and in its place imagines an independence sustained by a pagan connection to the rural.

This foregrounds her eventual metamorphosis into a witch. The transformation is hinted at in the early part of the novel. Following her move to the city, her sister-in-law Caroline remarks on the physical changes in Laura, changes that resemble the stereotypical features of the witch in popular culture: 'Her face was beginning to stiffen. It had lost its power of expressiveness, and was more and more dominated by the hook nose and the sharp chin' (p. 59). These changes mark a shift in Laura's perception of her own identity. When she first moves to London, her young nieces are unable to pronounce Laura and rechristen her 'Lolly'. But as time progresses, this change in name becomes symptomatic of a fissure emerging in her identity:

she seemed to herself to have become a different person. Or rather, she had become two persons, each different. One was Aunt Lolly, a middle-aged lady, light-footed upon stairs, and indispensable for Christmas Eve and birthday preparations. The other was Miss Willowes [...] whom Caroline would introduce, and abandon to a feeling of being neither light-footed nor indispensable. But Laura was put away. (p. 61)

Laura's identity is split into the carefree Aunt Lolly on one hand, and the less socially desirable Miss Willowes on the other. Both names, however, signal her as a maiden aunt, one who is no longer of marriageable age. Her fragmented subjectivity means that the putting away of 'Laura' reads as a concealment of her 'self'. Yet Laura's escape to Great

Mop and her paganism function as a means of reclaiming her subjectivity, and so the putting away of her name becomes presciently symbolic of her change in identity.

This transformation is not a new identity, though, but a refiguring of her old one. Laura's power to remould is signified in the scene where she bakes cookies, following her move to Great Mop:

To amuse herself she had cut the dough into the likenesses of the village people. Curious developments took place in the baking. Miss Carloe's hedgehog had swelled until it was almost as large as its mistress. The dough had run into it, leaving a great hole in Miss Carloe's side. Mr. Jones had a lump on his back, as though he were carrying the Black Dog in a bag; and a fancy portrait of Miss Larpent in her elegant youth and a tight-sweeping amazon had warped and twisted until it was more like a gnarled thorn tree than a woman. (p. 142)

The villagers are grotesquely distorted; their shape and form transformed into images from the natural world, but these images are so misshapen that they appear unnatural. The scene appears as part of a wider commentary on the very constitution of 'naturalness' and 'unnaturalness'. The central concern of Barbara Brothers' essay on *Lolly Willowes* is how in order to 'escape from the powerful scripts of patriarchy, a woman must reinterpret what is "natural" and retell the myths of the past'.⁷³ Brothers proceeds to suggest that '[m]uch of the imagery of the novel puts the natural world Laura loves and is associated with against what she sees as the unnatural and artificial world man has created'.⁷⁴ Her efforts, then, to remould the identity of herself and others signals her awareness that codes of naturalness and unnaturalness must be entirely rewritten if she is to forge her own subjectivity.

⁷³ Barbara Brothers, 'Flying the Nets at Forty: *Lolly Willowes* as Female Bildungsroman', in *Old Maids To Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Laura Doan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 195-212 (p. 196).

⁷⁴ Brothers, 'Flying the Nets', p. 210.

Thus, Laura's transformation allows her to refigure the unnaturalness and the deviance of both the witch and the spinster. The arrival of a mysterious kitten signifies the completion of Laura's transformation; when the stray kitten bites her, drawing blood, she recognises this as the moment of metamorphosis: 'She, Laura Willowes, in England, in the year 1922, had entered into a compact with the Devil. The compact was made, and affirmed, and sealed with the round red seal of her blood' (p. 169). As Brothers observes, what 'makes the power of a witch so extraordinary is not its unnaturalness but its naturalness, the ability of a witch to be herself and not *woman* as defined by society.'⁷⁵ The transformation does initially seem to enable Laura to recover her own subjectivity while still integrating herself into the community of Great Mop. Upon discovering the change in Laura, her landlady leads her to a Witches Sabbath, where Laura discovers that the rest of the village is populated by witches and warlocks. Although she admits that she 'was denied the social gift' and 'had never been good at enjoying parties' she hopes the Sabbath will be 'a different and more exhilarating affair' (p. 188). But she seems incongruous in this environment, too; she wryly notes that '[e]ven as a witch [...] she was doomed to social failure' (p. 191). Brothers, then, does not fully engage with the difference between the rural environment of the natural world and rural society that is constructed as patriarchal.

Jane Garrity has suggested that Warner 'conflates the spinster and the witch because each similarly poses a threat to heterosexuality'.⁷⁶ We see this conflation at the Sabbath, in a dance Laura enjoys with a girl called Emily. The encounter between Laura and Emily is heavily eroticised; a strand of Emily's hair that brushes across Laura's face

⁷⁵ Brothers, 'Flying the Nets', p. 208.

⁷⁶ Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 163.

causes her to ‘tingle from head to foot’ (p. 192). Garrity reads Laura as specifically lesbian, arguing that the very transformation of Laura from spinster into witch to is an encoding of ‘lesbian desire’, in a narrative strategy of ‘concealment and disclosure’.⁷⁷ Garrity’s reading of *Lolly Willowes* and its ‘absence of overt lesbianism’ still appropriates the text as part of sapphic modernism. Here, this sapphism is no longer privileged as a metropolitan conception and instead becomes possible through rural life. Garrity suggests that this is a commentary on the ‘concept of expansiveness, sapphic modernism, and what national affiliation means for the interwar lesbian whose metaphorical mapping of space is suffused with both progressive ideas regarding culture and politics and the conventional notion that cultural purity resides in English geography’.⁷⁸ For Garrity, then, this form of writing offers the lesbian an outlet away from the exposure of an urban environment which unnaturalises her, both in terms of her sexuality and her subjectivity. The questioning of conventional gender boundaries is evident throughout the text, suggesting that through the identity of the witch Laura is able to claim a legitimate space outside of the heteronormative. When Satan appears at the Sabbath, Laura describes him as an ambiguous figure:

She saw his face [...]. It was like the face of a very young girl [...]. It was lifeless, lifeless! But below it, in the hollow of the girlish throat, she saw a flicker of life, a small regular pulse, small and regular as though a pearl necklace slid by under the skin. Mincing like a girl, the masked young man approached her. (p. 200)

As a girl in the form of man, the portrait of Satan hints towards a politics of inversion, but he appears only ‘like’ a girl and not actually as one, and Laura quickly recognises that this figure is an impostor. While Garrity’s argument is persuasive, and allows for a

⁷⁷ Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, pp. 150-1.

⁷⁸ Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 144.

reimagining of British female modernism, it relies on a trope of inversion, and thus closes down the ambiguities of transgressive sexuality; although she acknowledges the instability of the category of spinster, Garrity does not adequately do so for the lesbian.

It could be argued, however, that the text itself is guilty of ignoring the ambiguities of deviant sexuality. For example, the real Satan appears to Laura in male form. Brothers advises that we remain unconcerned by this since Satan ‘has been genderised in men’s imaginative descriptions’ and, as a concept, has been ‘defined in different ways at different time by males who have controlled the definitions of the labels circumscribing and delineating our lives’.⁷⁹ However, the fact that this association is maintained in the text, despite its supposed radicalism, is curious. This has resonances with Garrity’s argument that women writers like Warner can only construct ideas of nation in terms of the binary division of masculine and feminine, or male and female.⁸⁰ When Laura asks Satan, ““Why do you encourage me to talk when you know all my thoughts””, Satan replies that he does so ““not that I may know all your thoughts, but that you may”” (p. 240). Laura’s identity as a witch allows her to fully realise her own subjectivity. However, if she is a lesbian, as Garrity and others agree, it is still unclear how Laura is unable to create this identity *for herself*, outside the confines of patriarchal models of binary distinctions. It could be that the fantasy narrative, rather than appearing as a camouflage, is an illustration of what Terry Castle has described as the ‘yearning for that, which is, in a cultural sense, implausible – the subversion of male homosocial desire lesbian fiction characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as “realistic” in surface

⁷⁹ Brothers, ‘Flying the Nets at Forty’, pp. 209-10.

⁸⁰ Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 8.

detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical or utopian tendency'.⁸¹ In other words, the fantastical elements of a text like *Lolly Willowes* are required not to hide its subversion, but to imagine a self-fashioning of female subjectivity that is impossible in the heteronormative world.

Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936)

The complexities of inversion and its potential implications for constructions of reproduction, nation, and spatial geographies are dramatised throughout Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*. The novel begins in the midst of a collapsing imperialist framework.⁸² Following the death of his mother, Hedvig, in childbirth, and the later death of his father, Guido, Felix Volkbein is left to carry on the family name. Although Felix adopts his father's title of Baron, he remains unaware that Guido had assumed this designation in order to obscure his Jewish identity and to claim a noble, Austrian lineage. Here, the cosmopolitanism associated with modernism signifies the instability of national identities that characterised modernity.⁸³

⁸¹ Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', p. 547. Castle's analysis of another Warner novel, *Summer Will Show*, uses Eve Kosofsky's Sedgwick's argument that male homosocial desire is mediated through the 'body and soul of a woman' and is canonized in literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Castle theorises lesbian desire as a disruption of this permeating patriarchal structure in the way in which it suppresses or eradicates male bonding, but she sees this in the context of realist fiction where this disruption is 'finite' and is usually followed by the restitution of male homosocial desire; thus, viewing its continuation in Warner's fiction as an indication of its allegorical and fantastical nature.

⁸² Deborah Parsons, *Djuna Barnes* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2003), p. 91.

⁸³ The representation of Jewishness in *Nightwood* has been explored in detail by critics such as Jane Marcus Mairéad Hanrahan and Erin G. Carlston. Barnes plays with the Fascist implications of reading Jewishness as a race, as well as a religion. For further details see: Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Mairéad Hanrahan, 'Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*: The Cruci-Fiction of the Jew', *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, 24.1 (2001), 32-49; and Jane Marcus, 'Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic', in *Silence and Power: A Re-evaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), pp. 221-51.

The disintegration of imperialism, and the patrilineal structures that uphold it, is also linked with a wider destabilisation of gender boundaries. This is illustrated by the collapse of Felix's marriage to Robin Vote. Robin acts a cipher for Felix; he feels as though 'he could talk to her, tell her anything, though she herself was so silent'.⁸⁴ As such, Robin initially appears to play the role of the passive wife, producing the male heir needed to continue the Volkbein line. The fulfilling of her reproductive duty, however, induces feelings of horror in Robin:

Amid loud and frantic cries [...] Robin was delivered. Shuddering in the double pains of birth and fury, cursing like a sailor, she rose up on her elbow in her bloody gown, looking about her in the bed as if she had lost something [...]. A week out of bed she was lost, as if she had done something irreparable, as if this act had caught her attention for the first time. (p. 43)

In this scenario, Robin herself is delivered, not her child. The various connotations of the word 'delivered' – the act of handing something over or passing it on, the almost religiously ecstatic state of being liberated or set free – all prefigure Robin's rejection of the role of sacred mother and her estrangement from her son. Like Hedvig, who 'thrust her son from herself before dying' (p. 1), Robin disassociates herself from her child, Guido, and is 'lost' in the role of mother, proclaiming to Felix that she 'didn't want' her son (p. 44). Felix finds Robin one day like a modern Lady Macbeth, 'holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down', but is relieved to see her bring it down 'gently' instead (p. 43). It remains unclear if this scenario is as it appears, or if Felix interprets Robin's emotional disconnection from her son as the most extreme perversion of motherhood – namely, infanticide.

⁸⁴ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 37. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

Robin's rejection of her family means that she can now be read as a single woman. She leaves both Felix and her son and embarks on an affair with Nora Flood. In the novel, this becomes a marker of her deviant and degenerate sexuality. Her lesbian identity is disruptive of heteronormativity, and the gender binary that sustains it. The text plays with conception of masculine and feminine as it inverts fairy-tale within the narrative. Judith Lee argues that *Nightwood's* use of "anti-fairy tales" [...] caricature[s] [...] the qualities opposed in masculine and feminine to show that they are inherently incompatible'.⁸⁵ This is certainly evident in Doctor O'Connor's tale of Mademoiselle Basquette. The mythic beauty of the mademoiselle's face, 'gorgeous and bereft as the figure head of a Norse vessel that the ship has abandoned' is juxtaposed with her legless, amputated body, which she wheels 'through the Pyrenees on a board' (pp. 23-4). The sailor who falls in love with her offers her no hope of being integrated into a romance narrative: 'he snatched her up, board and all, and took her away and had his will' (p. 24). The rape of Mademoiselle Basquette brings to the fore the subtext of masculine domination and feminine passivity that characterises fairy tale narratives and renders it grotesque.

As the text progresses, though, the stability of those gender significations in themselves is called into question. When Nora visits Doctor O'Connor to ask for his advice on her relationship with Robin, the Doctor asks:

'what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace – neither one and half the other the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason. We were

⁸⁵ Judith Lee, 'Nightwood: "The Sweetest Lie"', in *Silence and Power: A Re-evaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), pp. 207-218 (p. 208).

impaled in our childhood upon them as they ride through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl, for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince – and not a man. They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them. They are our answer to what our grandmothers were told love was, and what it never came to be; they, the living lie of our centuries.’ (pp. 123-4)

Jane Marcus, in her highly influential essay on *Nightwood*, argues that the ‘prince-princess’ in this passage is an androgynous figure, a figure that is chosen when ‘the love that one has been told to expect never arrives’.⁸⁶ For Marcus, androgyny is a by-product of inversion, and a way of navigating the myth of heteronormative desire. The way in which Doctor O’Connor moves back and forth across masculine and feminine boundaries certainly begins to efface the differences between them, so that gender divisions become increasingly difficult to demarcate. But, as Judith Lee, points out, the notion of androgyny relies upon the notion of ‘resolution of sexual difference’, which she maintains is absent from the text; instead, she argues that the figure is narcissistic, ‘the love of the self in the other’ and suggests that the ‘fairy-tale romance’ is “‘the sweetest lie’” because for Barnes’ characters ‘love leads not to an experience of wholeness but to the discovery that such an experience is irrecoverable’.⁸⁷ Lee’s argument is persuasive, and its reliance on maintaining openness and irresolution is in keeping with Barnes’s linguistic style and the broader modernist aesthetics of fragmentation and instability.

More significantly, it allows for the reimagining of female subjectivity for the sexually transgressive single woman, moving beyond reliance either on a model of inversion or on the stability of lesbian desire. This approach enables us to re-examine the relationship between Nora and Robin, and explore the narcissism manifest in it. Nora

⁸⁶ Marcus, ‘Laughing at Leviticus’, p. 239.

⁸⁷ Lee, *Nightwood*, p. 209.

admits to the Doctor that ““I thought I loved her [Robin] for her sake, and I found it was for my own”” (p. 136) and says of Robin that ““[s]he is myself”” (p. 115). Consequently, Nora’s identity is, in part, constituted through her relationship to Robin. As she explains to Doctor O’Connor: ‘a woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own’” (p. 129). Nora’s subjectivity is both constituted and threatened by Robin. What implication might this have, then, for Marcus’s argument that the dynamic between Nora and Robin operates around Nora’s ‘possessive infantilisation of Robin’?⁸⁸ Nora’s description of Robin as both her ‘lover’ and her ‘child’ (p. 141) effectively means Nora’s love is narcissistic and incestuous. Marcus acknowledges that Nora’s infantilisation of Robin can be read as a re-enactment of patriarchal power through its ‘insistence on monogamy and control of the beloved’.⁸⁹ The lengthy passages in the novel dedicated to Nora’s agony over her loss of Robin emphasise her obsessive need to possess Robin, aligning with Nora with masculine, patriarchal imperialism. ‘[K]nown instantly as a Westerner’ (p. 45), Nora runs her salon from a site that encapsulates primogeniture and patrilinealism, a family estate with ‘its own burial ground, and a decaying chapel’ (p. 45). If we accept that Nora infantilizes Robin, then a dyadic relationship of father/child is set up.

This paternal metaphor, however, is problematised through the doll that Robin gives to Nora during their relationship. When Nora sees that Robin has now given it to her new lover, Jenny, she breaks down and tells the Doctor:

‘We give death to a child when we give it a doll – it’s the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to a woman, is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane.’ (p. 128)

⁸⁸ Marcus, ‘Laughing at Leviticus’, p. 232.

⁸⁹ Marcus, ‘Laughing at Leviticus’, p. 234.

Shari Benstock claims that here Nora acknowledges the doll as ‘a symbol of the child the lesbian relationship cannot produce’ and in doing so ‘articulates the primary reason homosexuality stands outside the patriarchal law: the homosexual act is not procreative’.⁹⁰ Jane Marcus similarly suggests that ‘[t]he doll signifies [...] the unnatural and illegitimate in their relationship’.⁹¹ While both critics highlight the doll’s signification of the perverse, neither explicitly addresses how it problematises the paternal construction of Nora and Robin’s relationship. In giving the doll to Nora, Robin imaginatively assumes a maternal role, yet she has rejected this physical role by abandoning her husband and child. This, then, suggests a reworking of the maternal role in lesbian sexuality, which, in turn, subverts the legitimacy of the mother in the heterosexual script.

This subversion continues in the text’s depiction of innocence. As Nora explains, when a doll is given to a child it is a gift of death; specifically, the death of innocence. Marcus notes that in Western culture, dolls are given to girls ‘to develop their maternal instincts’.⁹² In the context of this observation, the giving of a doll comes to symbolise the moment that a young girl’s innocence ends and she becomes the reproductive body that heterosexual ideology demands of her. David Copeland argues that Robin herself is ‘the character who most ardently desires innocence, mistaking it for a kind of memory-erasing tranquiliser familiar to children and beasts’.⁹³ Copeland’s assertion does have some

⁹⁰ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, p. 261.

⁹¹ Marcus, ‘Laughing at Leviticus’, p. 243.

⁹² Marcus, ‘Laughing at Leviticus’, p. 243.

⁹³ David Copeland, ‘The Innocent Children of *Nightwood* and Hayford Hall’, in *Hayford Hall: Hangovers, Erotics and Modernist Aesthetics*, ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks and Sandra Chait (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2005), pp. 116-32 (p. 121).

substance; Felix describes how Robin ‘always seemed to be looking for someone to tell her that she was innocent’ and observes that without ‘permission to live’ she ‘will make an innocence for herself; a fearful sort of primitive innocence’ (p. 105), while Nora argues that Robin ‘could never be [...] corrupt’ (p. 51). Both Felix and Nora, though, are aligned with the patriarchal, and their construction of Robin as innocent is symptomatic of the ambivalent positioning of her, which plays on Robin’s desire for innocence and the loss of sexual innocence that marriage and motherhood implies.

Copeland’s analysis is further problematised when read against Deborah Parsons’ study of the streetwalking figure in women’s fiction. In detailing the relationship of Robin with the city streets that she wanders, Parsons perceives Robin as the embodiment of ‘the surrealist eroticisation of urban degradation and detritus’.⁹⁴ Initially, though, Robin is shown to walk both urban and rural landscapes indiscriminately:

Robin prepared herself for her child with her only power: a stubborn cataleptic calm conceiving herself pregnant before she was; and, strangely aware of some lost land in herself, she took to going out; wandering the countryside; to train travel, to other cities, alone and engrossed. (p. 41)

The implication is that pregnancy threatens Robin’s sense of her own self, thus her walking the streets is an effort to reclaim her own identity, to redeem the ‘lost land in herself’. This land becomes increasingly urbanised following her pregnancy, and when Robin takes to patrolling the city streets at night, the text increasingly associates her with degeneration, as Parsons surmises: ‘[t]he primitive conduct of the night world is defined as debased by the codes of the day, which are so pervasive that they become internalised by the night figures themselves, who come to conceive of themselves as the degenerate of

⁹⁴ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 179.

society'.⁹⁵ If Robin is constructed by the co-existence of her desire to stay innocent and her conception of herself as a degenerate, then she remains trapped between these opposing ideologies, and her efforts to reclaim subjectivity by wandering the streets are doomed to failure.

The state of limbo that Robin exists in becomes anchored in 'the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds' (p. 31). To Nora, Robin's wanderings may represent freedom but they also stand as a denial of coherent subjectivity: "Robin can go anywhere, do anything [...] because she forgets, and I nowhere, because I remember" (p. 137). The narrative depicts the somnambule as fragmented; Robin's 'cataleptic' calm hints at an altered state, trapping her in-between the conscious and the unconscious. Somnambulism becomes a purgatory, which condemns Robin to remain in a state of hypnosis from which even Nora cannot rescue her: "she was in her own nightmare. I tried to come between and save her, but I was like a shadow in her dream that could never reach her in time" (p. 131). Nora appears unable to offer Robin light in the dark, only further 'shadow'. Furthermore, Robin's wanderings, and her affairs with both men and women, strip of her any stable categorisation of her sexuality, and instead she disconnects herself not only from the heterosexual narrative, but the physical world itself. The Doctor informs Felix that in the letters Robin writes to others she asks to be remembered, and the Doctor suggests that the reason for this is 'because she has difficulty in remembering herself' (p. 109). In this sense, Robin's grasp of her own subjectivity is tenuous, but she simultaneously eludes the grasp of others, as Nora articulates: "I can only find her again in my sleep or in her death; in both she has

⁹⁵ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 180.

forgotten me”” (p. 116). Robin becomes lost to her dream-like state and remains alienated from her self

Anaïs Nin’s *Winter of Artifice* (1939-45)

The three novellas collected in Anaïs Nin’s *Winter of Artifice* – ‘Stella’, ‘Winter of Artifice’ and ‘The Voice’ – explore the workings of a similar dreamworld to the one that Robin frequents in *Nightwood*. Unlike Robin, however, the female characters in these stories are predominantly involved in heterosexual relationships with numerous lovers and partners. Their apparently promiscuous identities, however, seemingly arise out of yearning for love, rather than sex. In ‘Stella’, the eponymous female protagonist is willing to sacrifice everything in her pursuit of love, even her career as an actress: ‘she broke contracts easily, sailed at a moment’s notice, and no pursuit of fame could interfere with the course of love’.⁹⁶ The extent of her emotional investment in love is evident in her relationship with Bruno, her married lover. After a lengthy absence, the night of his arrival takes on the quality of becoming ‘as long, as portentous, as deep as a whole existence’ (‘Stella’, p. 15). Yet despite her supposed surrender to love, Stella cannot give herself completely to Bruno, who spends his time ‘in a struggle to reassure her, to reconquer her, to renew her faith’ (‘Stella’, p. 16). Bruno reveals his need to dominate Stella, but Stella rebuffs this, resenting his commitment to his family not because of any guilt over her affair with a married man, but because of her objections to marriage itself:

It was not that Stella wanted the wife’s role or place. She knew deep down how unfitted she was for this role [...]. It was merely that she could not share a love without the feeling that into this region of Bruno’s being she did not care to enter,

⁹⁶ Anaïs Nin, ‘Stella’, in *Winter of Artifice* (London: Peter Owen, 1991), pp. 7-54, (p. 16). All further references are to this edition and novella titles are given parenthetically in the text.

that there lay a danger of death to their relationship. For her, any opening, any unconquered region contained the hidden enemy, the seed of death, the possible destroyer. Only absolute possession calmed her fear. ('Stella', p. 17)

In Stella's eyes her unsuitability for domestic life arises from her belief that marriage is antithetical to love. Furthermore, she is unable to give herself in a relationship because it is she who wants 'absolute possession'. As Lilith in 'The Voice' recognises, this possession is impossible since it is a male privilege; she knows 'as a woman there is no other way of possessing a woman but as man'.⁹⁷ Thus Stella remains locked in a state of stasis, unable to give herself to love, but unable to escape from its grasp.

Lilith is similarly enslaved to love. Although she is a married woman, her resistance to male possession estranges her marriage. This resistance is coded sexually: 'Every night it had been the same flight, the same locked door against him, a hatred of his desire. She showed all her claws, her wild hair, her hatred of sex'. Lilith's experience of heterosexual desire points towards the brutality of marriage. Her refusal to lose her virginity to her husband prompts him to suggest she 'have it done by a doctor' with a knife ('The Voice', p. 146). This rather violent initiation makes Lilith 'close forever' and she declares that '[n]o one can take possession of me' ('The Voice', p. 147). For Lilith, possession is equated with a loss of sexual innocence. Yet the penetration of Lilith by the doctor only strengthens her resolve to remain uncorrupted by masculine sexuality and maintain her autonomy. It also marks her refusal to become a reproductive body. In 'The Voice', both Lilith and Djuna reject the role of motherhood, and are consequently portrayed as transgressive. The text itself points to the connotations of Lilith's name: Lilith, first wife of Adam, 'not made of the same substance' as man and so 'one whom

⁹⁷ Anaïs Nin, 'The Voice', in *Winter of Artifice* (London: Peter Owen, 1991), pp. 120-175, (p. 160). All further references are to this edition and novella titles are given parenthetically in the text.

man can never possess altogether' ('The Voice', p. 162). The narrative obliquely describes her as the 'unmated woman', skirting around the association of Lilith with child killing in Jewish folklore. Djuna is similarly childless, having had a hysterectomy due to medical complications. Although for Lilith the refusal to reproduce is a method of empowerment, the inability of Djuna to conceive excludes her from the heterosexual script, as she explains:

'I feel that men will never want me because I can't have a child. But that is good because I don't like men, they have no tenderness. Not being able to have a child – that means I am a cripple; men won't love me. But I'm sure I wouldn't like it with a man – I tried how it felt once with a toothbrush and didn't like it'. ('The Voice', p. 128)

The pre-emptive rejection of motherhood signifies Djuna's disavowal of heterosexual desire, but her description of herself as a 'cripple' constructs her as a defective body whose femininity is somehow incomplete.

This construction becomes part of a discourse that distinguishes between normative and non-normative sexuality, and which is defined in psychoanalytic terms. Upon first meeting with The Voice, she announces "'I find it hard to confess to you, I am a pervert, I've had a lot of affairs with women'" ('The Voice', p. 126). Djuna's words satirise the psychoanalytic construction of lesbianism as sexually deviant. Helen Tookey has observed that because second-wave feminism located psychoanalysis 'firmly within an oppressively normative, reactionary medical establishment', Nin's preoccupation with it has obscured how she engaged with female subjectivity. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism was fraught but not always conflicting. Psychoanalytic discourse here highlights Djuna's struggle to articulate her desires outside what Tookey calls 'the limiting psychic structures imposed by

patriarchy'.⁹⁸ Furthermore, it signals the emergence of a more surrealist aesthetic whose aim was to 'detach psychoanalysis from medicine, linking it rather with the avant-garde project of exploring the unconscious in order to subvert both the bourgeois social order and the supposedly rational subject at the heart of that order'.⁹⁹ While surrealism has been charged with accusations of misogyny, *Winter of Artifice* appropriates its aesthetics to underline the difficulties of securing a place in a bourgeois social order that is also heteronormative.

This becomes increasingly legible in the text's depiction of heterosexual desire as illusory. Lilith fantasises about a lover who is 'the man nearest to God' and in this vision, she has the 'power' to realise 'the gifts promised long ago by the fairy tales' ('The Voice', p. 163). Even though Lilith refuses to perform the sexual demands placed on her by patriarchy, she seems reluctant to give up the dream of heterosexual love that the 'gifts' of fairy tales represent. The Voice, a curiously disembodied character that acts as both psychoanalyst and priest for Lilith, seemingly attempts to take advantage of this and tries to initiate a romantic relationship with Lilith. He sends her a frog and promises her a metamorphosis if she keeps 'her inner vision of him' and keeps believing 'in what lay hidden in this frog's body' ('The Voice', p. 166). Lilith cannot perform such a task since she ultimately recognises the promise of the prince as an illusion: '[n]either her powers of illusion nor her dreams had worked the miracle. He remained nothing but a VOICE' ('The Voice', p. 169). The disembodiment of heterosexual desire hinted at by The Voice points to what Tookey identifies as the 'the notion of epistemic difficulty, a mysteriousness or evasiveness which defies the structures of knowledge [that] may be

⁹⁸ Tookey, *Fictionality and Femininity*, p. 80.

⁹⁹ Tookey, *Fictionality and Femininity*, p. 80.

associated with “woman” in general’.¹⁰⁰ If we follow Tookey’s logic, it offers the potential to read *The Voice* as symbolic of how the female subject desires to evade the knowingness of the heterosexual script that constrains her attempt to reclaim subjectivity.

In a text fixated on constructions of love, femininity and subjectivity, it is also possible to track how romantic conventions are destabilised and fragmented. When Stella begins an affair with Philip, the intimacy of seeing his bathroom, of seeing the silver ‘objects made for or given by women’ brings back memories of her father. These memories associate masculinity with virility, infidelity and exhibitionism – in both Philip and her father, Stella sees ‘the wife’, the ‘public’, and the mistresses’ (‘Stella’, p. 51) – but they also point towards a love that, for Stella, is one of artifice. She realises that in this kind of love, ‘Philip will receive bouquets from women, and Stella will find again the familiar pain her father had given her, which she didn’t want’ (‘Stella’, p. 52). The figures of father and lover are conflated, but the resultant figure is discarded since neither object is desired; in “*The Voice*”, the two images remain separate, with Lilith desiring the latter, but rejecting the former: ‘It was a father she was looking for, not a lover’ (‘*The Voice*’, p. 164). In ‘*Winter of Artifice*’, the dynamics of the father/lover dichotomy again dominates, and the father figure is reconstructed as lover. The anonymous narrator describes the profound impact her absent father has had on her. The ‘yearning for her father’ that becomes ‘a long, continuous complaint’ transforms her diary into a paean to him.¹⁰¹ Whereas Lilith fantasises about a man who is nearest to God, for the narrator of

¹⁰⁰ Tookey, *Fictionality and Femininity*, p. 107

¹⁰¹ Anaïs Nin, ‘*Winter of Artifice*’, in *Winter of Artifice* (London: Peter Owen, 1997), pp. 55-119 (p. 62). All further references are to this edition and novella titles are given parenthetically in the text.

‘Winter of Artifice’, ‘[h]er true God was her father’ (‘Winter of Artifice’, p. 65). The implications of this are clear:

At communion it was her father she received, and not God. She closed her eyes swallowed the white bread with blissful tremors [...] The voluptuous tears at night when she prayed to God, the joy without name when she stood in his presence, the inexplicable bliss at communion, because then she talked with her father and she kissed him. (‘Winter of Artifice’, p. 65)

The eroticism of this communion renders the narrator’s love for her father as incestuous. Throughout the novellas, the familial ideologies of heterosexuality are disrupted and distorted.

The motif of incest is a recurrent one in Nin’s fiction and has become the focus of discussion among many critics. Shari Benstock argues that in Nin’s earlier work, *House of Incest* (1936), ‘this “house” figures woman’s fragmented and internally divided personality; through its rooms she wanders in search of her identity’, until she achieves ‘psychic integration’.¹⁰² In Benstock’s reading, incest becomes the struggle for the narrator to overcome estrangement from herself, an estrangement that the narrator of ‘Winter of Artifice’ feels too, since her desire for her father is detrimental to her own subjectivity: ‘She had loved him [...] by denying her feminine emotional self’ (‘Winter of Artifice’, p. 79). Subjectivity, then, becomes a site of negotiation for the single woman. For Stella, there is a fissure between her identity as woman and her identity as actress. She is aware of a disconnection between the two, labelling the image she projects on screen as both her ‘double’ and as a ‘work of artifice’ (‘Stella’, p. 7). Tookey has examined how:

The actress’s identity does not lie in some ‘real’ self, removed from the sphere of acting, nor entirely in the roles she enacts on screen, but in the negotiation

¹⁰² Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, pp. 430-3.

between the 'fictional' and the 'historical' that she makes in her interpretations of roles as 'projections' or 'extensions' of her self.¹⁰³

The interplay between the fictional and the historical is evident in the way Stella casts herself in the roles of legendary, mythic women (Joan of Arc, Electra, Carlota). In doing so Stella defers her understanding of her own self-identity by fracturing it, 'decompos[ing] before the mirror into a hundred personages' ('Stella', p. 32). The mirror is used as a metaphor through which the flux in female subjectivity can be explored, and suggests that, as Tookey argues, there is no real 'self' to Stella, only fragments.

The continued negotiation of Stella's sense of self in mirrored surfaces through her adult life implies an attempt to resolve the disparity between her own self and the self that is projected, and piece together the fragments. Her image in her interior mirror is small, a 'child woman' ('Stella', p. 7). She fails to recognise herself in photographs, up to the age of about five years, and up until the age of fourteen, Stella is unable to see her reflection: 'No image. No reflection [...] In the mirror there never appeared a child' ('Stella', p. 31).¹⁰⁴ When she describes the glass decorating her grand house, she observes how 'it was the prism that threw her vision back into seclusion again, into the wall of the self' ('Stella', p. 25). It is only acting that allows her to overcome her alienation from herself, but her desire to make her multiple selves coherent is problematised by patriarchal structures. As Stella articulates:

She rejects all the plays. Because they cannot contain her. She wants to walk into her own self, truly presented, truly revealed. She wants to act only herself. She is no longer an actress willing to disguise herself. She is a woman who has lost herself and feels she can recover it by acting this self. But who knows her? What playwright knows her? Not the men who loved her. She cannot tell them. She is lost herself. ('Stella', p. 32)

¹⁰³ Tookey, *Fictionality and Femininity*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁴ This has parallels with Bliss's *Saraband*.

For Stella, her sense of self is defined by the men surrounding her. She may have her subjectivity, but there is no place in which she can express it. Acting cannot ultimately accommodate this subjectivity since it is based on the discourse of another: the playwright, or the ‘men who loved her.’ By contrast, writing affords the single woman the opportunity to opportunity to ‘write her self’.¹⁰⁵ The narrator of ‘Winter of Artifice’ demonstrates this through the authoring of her diary. There are discursive echoes of Stella’s story throughout the text; the narrator compares her diary to a mirror, an object that acts as ‘her shadow, her double’ (‘Winter of Artifice’, p. 66). Her desire to reclaim subjectivity is evident and initially manifests itself in her impersonations of Marie Antoinette for her brothers: ‘In acting the roles of other personages she felt that she was piecing together the fragments of her shattered life. Only in the fever of creation could she recreate her own lost life’ (‘Stella’, p. 64). The diary becomes a symbol of her struggle to emancipate herself through creativity, but since it also chronicles the debilitating effect her father’s absence has on her, it is still difficult to conceive how the narrator can establish subjectivity when her identity is eclipsed by the image of her father.

The inner struggle of the single woman in her efforts to negotiate subjectivity is epitomised in the surrounding urban landscape that is characterised by fragmentation and contradiction. In ‘The Voice’, the hotel that Djuna resides in represents a semi-public space for the single woman. It contrasts with the private, domestic sphere associated with the wife or mother, but Djuna’s description of the hotel rooms as ‘cells’ suggests restriction and confinement (‘The Voice’, p. 120). The hotel is a site of ambiguity and

¹⁰⁵ I use Cixous’s term here: see Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd edn, ed. by Robin R. Warhol and Diane P. Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 347-62.

collapsing boundaries; it is simultaneously a house for 'lovers' and the 'unloved'; it is a 'convent of adulteries' that juxtaposes religious celibacy with illicit sex ('The Voice', p. 121). Dubbed 'Hotel Chaotica', it signifies the disunity and discord that the sanctity of the domestic has been traded for. At the same time, the hotel and the city itself afford the single woman a space in which she can explore her freedoms and emancipations; it offers Djuna a cloak of anonymity and isolation, for she can distance herself from the people of her past who have 'lost her tracks' in 'the enormous city' ('The Voice', p. 135). The underbelly of this existence is found in the 'debris' in the river of the city, the 'dead flowers [...] punctured rubber dolls [...] [d]ead cats [...]' ('The Voice', p. 123). Djuna compares the detritus with the inhabitants of the city:

When I watch people it is as if at the same time I saw the discarded parts of themselves. And so I can't see their motions except as acts which lead them faster and faster to the waste, the end, to the river where it will be thrown out. The faster they walk the streets the faster they move towards this mass of debris. That is how I see them, caught by a current that carries them off. ('The Voice', p. 123).

The 'discarded parts' of the people that Djuna sees around are analogous to the fragmented subjectivity of the single woman, except for one important difference: namely, the motion of other people compared with her own static nature:

'I hate to see people in the world, their masks, their falsities, their surrender to the world, their resemblances to others, their promiscuity. I only care about the secret self. I only want the dream and isolation. I have the fear that everyone is leaving, moving away, that love dies in an instant. Look at the people walking in the street, just walking and I feel this: they are walking, *but they are also being carried away* [...] And I feel myself standing there; I cannot move with them'. ('The Voice', p. 123).

The single woman stands disconnected from the world around, solitary in the magnitude of the urban landscape, but it is she who *chooses* to disengage from it in order to concentrate on her 'secret self', her inner fragmentation.

The single woman's efforts to heal the divisions in her subjectivity take place in an interior realm. Like Djuna, Lilith identifies with a feminine, psychic landscape that privileges the search for the self:

She lived in the myth. And she was lost in it. Always bathing in a world much larger than other people's, the world of dreams. Always caught again in a whirl, a quest, a continuous diabolical quest of an absolute that does not flow serenely but is pursued and grasped by sheer wakefulness. ('The Voice', pp. 157-8)

The single woman craves disconnection because the heterosexual, patriarchal structures of the world demand that she surrender her autonomy; the desire for the dream is, in part, a means by which to avoid possession. As Lilith remarks: 'She did not want reality. She was really a flame. No one could possess a flame' ('The Voice', p. 168). Despite this retreat into the interior, the lure of the external world remains present for the single woman. In their dreams both Djuna and Lilith are pursued by 'wakefulness', and so belong to a somnambulistic realm, between dreaming and waking. While the dream represents a retreat for them, the narrator of 'Winter of Artifice' constructs it as bound up with the restrictions of her incestuous relationship with her father. Tookey suggests that in her fiction Nin emphasises not the unconscious, but the interconnection of the unconscious with the conscious.¹⁰⁶ It is this interconnection that offers the single woman the only hope of coherence:

She was coming out of the ether of the past [...]. The last time she had come out of the ether was to look at her dead child, a little girl with long eye lashes and slender hands. She was dead. The little girl in her was dead too. The woman was saved. And with the little girl died the need of a father. ('Winter of Artifice', p. 119).

The anaesthetic properties of ether imply a metaphorical fog, or confusion, from which the narrator emerges. While the narrator can retreat into the interior, the success of

¹⁰⁶ Tookey, *Fictionality and Femininity*, pp. 131-2.

psychic reconstitution of her subjectivity is marked only by a negotiation of the exterior as well.

The collection of novellas ends with an ‘other’ narrative, an italicised section of abstract, dream-like writing. In it, the words appear as the collective unconscious of the female characters of all three stories: ‘When I entered the dream I stepped on a stage’ (‘The Voice’, p. 170). As an epilogue, the narrative offers little in the way of resolution, and instead offers a labyrinthine dream, ‘composed like a tower of layers [...] coiling downwards’ (‘The Voice’, p. 170). This structure is as multiple as the female self; as the narrator explains: ‘the steps of the dreams were a series of explosions in which all the condemned fragments of myself burst into a mysterious and violent life’ (‘The Voice’, p. 170). The dream distorts space and time, so that it was ‘not altogether the dream nor [...] the daylight’ but, rather, the ‘twilight of mercury’ (‘The Voice’, p. 172). As with *Nightwood*, twilight becomes the time when binary oppositions begin to bleed into one another. As the narrator asserts: ‘I ceased to be a woman’ (‘The Voice’, p. 173). The fractured narrative suggests that the single woman is a liminal figure, and her position in the twilight means she begins to disappear into the cracks between various modes of categorisation. At the same time, she emerges as part of what Tookey describes as the ‘fantasy of the ever-elusive, boundless, self’.¹⁰⁷ As we can see:

The dream was always running ahead of one. To catch up, to live for a moment in unison with that, that was the miracle. The life on the stage, the life of the legend dovetailed with the daylight, and out of this marriage sparked the great birds of divinity, the eternal moments. (‘The Voice’, p. 175).

¹⁰⁷ Tookey, *Fictionality and Femininity*, pp. 80-1.

The divinity of this experience lies in the co-existence of both the conscious and the unconscious, a world where signifiers cease to signify and the female subject can instead savour the 'eternal moments' where she is multiple, but no longer fragmented.

Conclusions

It is clear by now that the close connection of female modernist culture with lesbian sexuality has obscured its parallels with both crime fiction and middlebrow culture. The same cultural embodiments of the single woman are also legible even in modernist texts. The spinster rears her head in the form of Lolly Willowes, the unmarried woman trying to create an independent existence for herself in the city is embodied in Miriam Henderson in *Pilgrimage*, and the nymphomaniac is alluded to in the promiscuous characters of *Winter of Artifice*. There is also the same collapsing of boundaries between genders. What differentiates these modernist texts is the extent to which they explore the construction of female subjectivity through reworking tropes of normative and deviant sexuality. The transformation of Lolly into a witch rescues the spinster from its derogatory associations, and instead provides a model of empowerment. The journey of Miriam Henderson towards intellectual independence and autonomy is complicated not only by her affair with Shatov, but her struggle to claim subjectivity for herself on the city streets. Stella, Djuna and Lilith may all reject subordination through heterosexual desire and embark on lesbian affairs, but they still eroticise heterosexual love. The depiction of Robin Vote elides normative gender boundaries and, in doing so, destabilises the concept of the lesbian as invert.

The single women of these texts are marked as transgressive through their refusal to re-inscribe heteronormativity, and consequently, familial relationships are distorted throughout the texts. The women of *Winter of Artifice* all refuse to play the traditional roles of daughters, wives or mothers; they are either unable to reproduce, or choose not to, and their incestuous desire corrupts their status as daughters. All are guilty of violating either their own or someone else's marriage vows. The doll that Nora and Robin share only reminds us that they have chosen to deny the reproductive functions that heteronormativity demands of them. Robin's rejection of both her son and her husband is read as a sign of her perverseness, yet since she does not formally divorce Felix, her status as both lesbian and single woman remains ambiguous. Robin, along with Lilith and Djuna, seemingly turn to lesbian desire when their heterosexual relationships fail. This shows affinities with the texts studied in Chapters Four and Five, but here the struggle of the female protagonists to maintain their innocence and freedom from male possession is foregrounded. As an invert, Robin becomes child-like, lost, and an increasingly intangible figure who cannot be pinned down. Nora's love for Robin is a constant throughout the text, but her insistence on Robin's monogamy and her attempts at casting herself as the fairy-tale prince who tries to save Robin relegate Nora to patriarchal instrument. Not even love can rescue the single woman from her isolation. Miriam ultimately refuses to marry Shatov, despite her passionate love for him, and the women who yearn for love in *Winter of Artifice* are never satisfied by it. The single woman remains trapped between heterosexual and lesbian desire, yearning for both but fulfilled by neither.

This has an obvious resonance with the texts discussed in relation to middlebrow culture. Here, though, the depiction of the single woman in the more chaotic and

disconnected social environments associated with modernist work further complicates the reading of sexual categories. The transformation of Lolly Willowes into a witch is a fantastical prefiguring of the single woman's disconnection. Lolly leaves behind the banality of life by aligning herself with the Devil and acknowledging his superiority over all humankind. While this disconnection empowers Lolly, it constitutes confusion and loss for the women of *Nightwood* and *Winter of Artifice*. The dream fantasies of both Djuna and Lilith in *Winter of Artifice* are a means of avoiding subordination to heterosexual desire, with Lilith expressing her desire to live in the 'myth' so as to avoid possession. Yet she cannot completely inhabit this psychic world, and instead begins to exist in a somnambulist state. Nin's characters create an interior, psychic landscape for themselves that offers them freedom to indulge in a multiplicity of selves, yet this freedom can only truly be achieved by reconciling the interior with the exterior world. Somnambulism thus becomes a state of purgatory for the single woman, and she wanders the city streets in futility.

This futility is rooted in the single woman's struggle to negotiate her own subjectivity. Throughout these texts, she is estranged from herself, unable to retain a grasp on her own sense of identity. The image of the mirror becomes a metaphor for this struggle in *Winter of Artifice*, with Stella in particular using the mirror as a site to explore her sense of self. In *Pilgrimage*, the mirror becomes a gateway to the self, so that Shatov's observation of Miriam in front of the mirror renders her vulnerable to male possession and compromises female autonomy. We see the single woman's identity become increasingly fragmented, and, in turn, watch her struggle to retain possession of her own subjectivity. Robin's sense of self is threatened by her subjugation into

heterosexual institutions when she becomes a wife and mother, but walking away from this does not result in a coherent, emancipated identity. Robin, along with Djuna and Lilith from *Winter of Artifice*, remain trapped in a somnambulist world, gliding between subjectivity and objectivity and eluding the grasp of both.

The relationship of these women to the city consequently appears strained and complex. The urban freedoms associated with the modern city have been documented by both social historians and literary critics of the interwar period. If we accept Deborah Parsons' argument that the city in modernism is fragmented, then this calls into question its viability as a location that will enable women to reclaim their subjectivity. For Lolly Willowes, emancipation comes only with the return to the rural, and she abandons the masculinised space of the city having recognised that she wants nothing it has to offer her. In *Pilgrimage*, Miriam traverses the city streets and enjoys the sense of independence and freedom it gives her, but she remains aware of her vulnerability within this landscape as well, and the subjectivity she strives for continues to elude her. For Robin Vote, the city is merely a vaster space for her to lose herself in: it may offer her more bars and more women, but it does not give her solace. In an environment which, like T. S. Eliot's wasteland, has come to symbolise the dregs of existence, Robin remains doomed to never achieve the state of innocence she craves. In *Winter of Artifice*, the city is again associated with degeneration and chaos, and the women in these novellas retreat into a psychic fantasy land in an effort to reclaim their subjectivity. Ultimately, this represents only a temporary retreat for them, and their return to the exterior world only reinstates their confusion. The only single woman of these texts who appears to forge a new identity for herself is Lolly Willowes. It is somewhat ironic that, given the opportunities

offered to the single woman by the modern city, the only one who achieves emancipation is the one who retreats from it. The promises that modernity and the city offers to women are empty, suggesting that in the modern age, the single woman will always be marked as transgressive.

Conclusion

At the start of this research project, my focus on women's fiction of the interwar years was fostered by my interest in constructions of gender and sexuality in twentieth-century literature. It quickly became clear that my initial approach of questioning the relationship between lesbianism and censorship had missed what was so fascinating about women's interwar fiction in the first place: namely, the diversity of texts produced during the period, and the imaginative and multifaceted depictions of sexuality in them. The single woman slowly emerged as a figure through which I could broaden understanding of what transgressive female sexuality encompassed. I selected as wide a range of texts as I could without reducing my study to a survey: reading the myriad forms that the single woman took in these fictions demanded close textual analysis. Framing the discussion of women's writing through cultural hierarchies meant that the single woman could be analysed in a range of fictions to produce sustained, comparative analysis of texts that moved away from an author-centred approach.

Or so it seemed. For this had not taken into account the transformation in recent years of understandings of how brow boundaries had been delineated, and what literary value and what forms of cultural capital those boundaries inscribed. Women's fiction, in some respects, has benefited from the shifting conceptualisations of cultural hierarchies, particularly in the attempts to rescue the middlebrow from its pejorative connotations and the move to assimilate female writers into the literary canon. However, the increasing emphasis on the plurality of modernist and middlebrow cultures, along with considerations of their reception, readerships and dissemination, has meant that the labelling of authors as middlebrow or modernist misses the wide ranging networks that

crossed brow boundaries. Indeed, the anxiety over rigid categorisations has had a significant impact on this study; the notion of stabilising texts, let alone authors, as part of literary fields that themselves have become increasingly destabilised seemed somewhat reductive. Instead, I have chosen to challenge and refigure the various significations of the terms ‘middlebrow’ and ‘modernist’ by tracking their contradictions and complexities in texts associated with those literary cultures.

In doing so, my work has become part of a dialogue concerning not only the demarcation of cultural hierarchies, but also the sexual ambiguities depicted throughout female interwar fiction. These ambiguities can, to some degree, be framed by reference to historical contexts. The first half of the twentieth century was marked by a transformation in social constructions of gender spheres and of sexuality, both in America and Britain. The impact of war led to the progressive emancipation of women, and a reconfiguring of their role in the domestic and professional spheres, which meant that they could now access freedoms previously unavailable to them. The inevitable social instability that wartime brought coincided with new discourses in which anxiety concerning sex could be expressed. Indebted to the scientific developments that preceded them, sexology and psychoanalysis have become known for their methods of inscribing normative and non-normative sexuality. The tendency to compartmentalise sexology and psychoanalysis as regulatory discourses has perhaps obscured the diversity of, and conflict in, the ways of describing female sexuality. There was a plethora of different identities for the single woman at this time – the spinster, the old maid, the lesbian, the invert, the new woman, the odd woman, the shop girl, the nymphomaniac, the prostitute, the flapper – and the way in which they overlap, are conflated or just plain contradict each other, points to a

fragmented and incoherent figure. Literary representations of the single woman in women's writing of the 1920s to the 1940s illustrate the extent of this fragmentation. I demonstrate that categories of single women begin to collapse into one another, and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between them. The spinsters of golden age crime fictions, like Miss Betony, can be associated with the masculine privilege of the detective figure. Equally, she can be associated with a decayed specimen of womanhood like Miss Thurloe. The elderly spinster is vulnerable to attack from those such as Grace Aram and Mary Whittaker who seek to gain their fortune, but others, like Miss Climpson, can gather the necessary information to stop them. The sexual identities of younger single women in crime narratives are even more varied: the nymphomaniac Sonia Glück, the bohemian artist Agatha Troy, the lesbian predator of Mary Whittaker, or the vulnerable country girl, Bertha Gotobed. Those identities, however, are not as distinct as it may first appear, and it becomes clear that they are marked with class inflections.

The fissures in the identity of the single woman become even more apparent in the fictions I examine in relation to middlebrow culture. Virginia Woolf described the middlebrow as that which is 'betwixt and between' to signal its problematic position between high and low culture. In Chapter Four, I suggest that it is the single woman that is 'betwixt and between'. I reposition her as an ambiguous figure, caught between the opposing and conflicting narratives – domestic and bohemian, traditional and progressive, urban and rural – that characterise fictions associated with middlebrow. Since these binary oppositions have usually informed comparisons of middlebrow and modernist cultures, my analysis shows that distinguishing between the two fields of literary production may be even more difficult than previously thought. This enables me

to interrogate conventions that have usually been identified as traits of a certain type of fiction that itself can be described as middlebrow, and suggest that a reimagining of them might allow us to read against the perceived conservatism of the genre. For example, in *The Weather in the Streets*, Olivia Curtis's attempts to forge a bohemian identity for herself seem only gestural and contrived, but her position within the domestic, heterosexual narrative is a subversive and corrupting one. *Devoted Ladies*, meanwhile, seems to suggest that neither bohemianism nor domesticity is particularly appealing for the single woman. Consequently, texts associated with the middlebrow often critique romance narratives far more than has previously been acknowledged. This is evident even in novels such as *Frost in May* and *Luminous Isle*, which explore the negotiation of adolescent sexuality. The novels I examine in Chapter Four explore the single woman's experience of modernity through engaging with opposing ideologies. Thus, analysis of these fictions enables me to problematise the alignment of modernity with modernism.

This, in turn, allows me to demonstrate the parallels between texts associated with the middlebrow and more modernist fictions. Modernism has traditionally been deemed radical and progressive, both in its aesthetic and in its subject matter. This is exemplified in the construction of a sapphic or lesbian modernism, which itself re-inscribes the supposed radicalism of modernist culture. Studies of transgressive sexuality in female modernism rarely reference single women; instead, they are repeatedly drawn to the tropes of lesbianism, inversion, and perversion. Lesbian desire is not exclusive to modernist fiction, however. Both Jane in *Devoted Ladies* and Sydney in *The Hotel* are drawn towards relationships with other women, even if these women are portrayed as predatory. Furthermore, as Chapter Five demonstrates, the focus on the lesbian aesthetic

of modernist writings by women has obscured the complexity of the female figures found within these works. Nora Flood, Miriam Henderson and Lolly Willowes illuminate how distinctions between hetero- and homosexual desire can be redrawn, even collapsed altogether, so that female subjectivity itself becomes a tightrope act. Somnambulism recurs as a motif throughout these fictions, with characters such as Robin Vote and Lilith caught between the unconscious and the conscious. Although a text such as *Winter of Artifice* may be more explicit in its explorations of female subjectivity than, say, *Saraband*, there are clear affinities between the texts. Both suggest that the single woman is defined by her multiplicity, and her search for subjectivity is an attempt to piece the fragments of her 'selves' back together again.

As a discrete genre in itself, golden age crime fiction can also be read against both middlebrow and modernist culture. Indeed, its characteristics and conventions mean that the figure of the single woman is drawn in reference to the same tensions that exist between those cultures. We see, perhaps more explicitly in novels like *Unnatural Death* and *Artists in Crime*, that the single woman is positioned awkwardly between the country and the city, between the domestic and the professional, and between the traditional and the modern. In some ways, these works are much more dependent on stereotypes, and the class inflections in them are more pronounced. The alignment of the sexually deviant with the criminally deviant certainly suggests that the single woman is a double threat to the heterosexual order. Nonetheless, closer analysis of the texts reveals their suspicion of the psychoanalytic and sexological discourses that often construct these stereotypes. In *Artists in Crime*, the use of psychoanalysis to explain motivations for murder is viewed with scepticism, and *Unnatural Death* finds it difficult to distinguish between that which

is 'natural' and that which is 'unnatural'. In fact, the ambiguities of the single woman are what allow us to read against the supposed heteronormativity of crime fiction itself; resolution in crime fiction is inherently patriarchal (and, thus, heteronormative), yet the tensions which the single woman is emblematic of are rarely resolved (even if the women themselves are rather crudely removed from the text). Moreover, the perceived conservatism of crime fiction can be challenged, through identifying the ways in which these texts engage with modernity and resist formulaic structures. For instance, *The Franchise Affair* comments on the decline of the country-house tradition while remaining suspicious of the metropolitan and cosmopolitan, but it ultimately works as a howdunit, rather than a whodunit. *Artists in Crime*, meanwhile, is unable to decide whether the nymphomaniac is a victim or killer; either way, the potential sexual transgression of Troy remains. *Fear and Miss Betony*, by contrast, remains preoccupied with the older single woman, but despite the spinster-sleuth's obvious capabilities, it appears unclear where she belongs in a post-war world.

By positioning the single woman as a nexus for cultural anxieties concerning female sexuality, gender spheres, and brow boundaries, this study situates itself as part of an on-going debate concerning both cultural hierarchies and transgressive sexuality. These fields may at first seem rather disparate; despite a consideration of gender in middlebrow and modernist criticism, it has failed to explore the full range of paradigm shifts in gender spheres and sexual identities. What this project offers is a more sustained account of these shifts, and a more explicit consideration of them in their sociohistorical contexts. The richness of women's writing has at times been overshadowed by critical debates about the status of the so-called 'woman's novel', and there has not been

sufficient discussion of how notions of literary value and cultural capital debates have informed the categorisation of female authors and their texts. My thesis demonstrates the subversive potential of the single woman, not only in formally experimental texts, but also in novels read as middlebrow or conservative. Throughout the fictions that I examine, the single woman emerges as a troubled and transgressive figure, always caught between opposing ideologies and often in search of herself. The range of women's writing in this period is vast: I hope that the new ways of reading this fiction that I have suggested encourages literary and feminist critics alike to further explore the dynamic relationship between transgressive sexuality and cultural hierarchy.

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