Submerged Experimentation in Middlebrow Modernist Fiction

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2011

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the concept of submerged experimentation in middlebrow fiction of the modernist period. Disputing criticism that posits a “great divide” between highbrow modernism and middlebrow culture of the modernist period, I argue that middlebrow modernist authors were aware of and informed about highbrow modernist writers, adapting their innovative techniques to middlebrow publishing venues and readerships. From this process of adaptation emerged covertly experimental narrative techniques that my dissertation works to recover, document, and situate within the broader context of modernist studies.

The dissertation reexamines middlebrow texts from the modernist period through the critical lenses of postclassical narratology, feminist theory, and material-historical approaches to literature. The result of this integrative approach is a project which describes and classifies the formal and thematic concerns of middlebrow modernists while also engaging in the rhetorical study of specific texts. Even as I use a rhetorical approach, I also complement that approach with archival research aimed at reconstructing the original conditions of the texts’ production and reception--in order to identify how and why middlebrow modernist works had the effects they did. Each chapter brings a canonical highbrow modernist work into dialogue with a middlebrow modernist work to illustrate the similarities in their experimental impulses, as well as the strategic
differences influenced by audience, market, and gender: Virginia Woolf’s and Margaret Ayer Barnes’s uses of the domestic in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Edna His Wife*, H.D.’s and Zelda Fitzgerald’s intertextual constructions of character in *Asphodel* and “Miss Ella,” and Edith Wharton’s and Winifred Holtby’s experimentations with the tested woman plot in *The Age of Innocence* and *South Riding*. The dissertation concludes that middlebrow women writers were in fact using— but also repurposing—highbrow experimental techniques in their fiction, in ways that have not yet received adequate scholarly recognition.

In the past several decades, scholars in working in fields ranging from literary history to the study of popular culture have developed theories about artistic experimentation and the distinctions among high, middle, and lowbrow artifacts and practices. However, my dissertation illuminates a crucial issue that has been overlooked—namely, that middlebrow authors were not only aware of the highbrow modernist movement, but also actively incorporated highbrow modernist experimental impulses and techniques into their work. By recovering these buried relationships, my project corrects the critical tradition that views middlebrow texts as lacking formal integrity; the dissertation thus rethinks conventional definitions of the middlebrow to offer a more nuanced understanding of the range of experimentation in modernist fiction. By focusing on modes of submerged experimentation in middlebrow texts, I develop new ways of characterizing the distinction between high and middlebrow as it was understood and practiced in the modernist period. In the process, I seek to intervene in contemporary debates about the nature and scope of modernism itself. Ultimately, my reexamination of
middlebrow modernism will help to reframe current understandings of how women writers helped shape modernist practices.
To Pat Dunn and Robert Fisher
Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to finally thank all of the people who have made this document possible. I feel more indebted than I can express, and I am quite certain that without the compassion, support, and love of all of the people I will thank here, this project would never have been completed.

First and foremost I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, David Herman, for his unfailing support and guidance throughout this long journey. David offered constant enthusiasm, insightful and thoughtful feedback, and an incredible amount of patience. Most of all, David modeled the type of mentor and scholar I hope to someday become – invested, passionate, supportive, and caring. I would also like to thank Jim Phelan, who offered constructive criticism and incisive comments that always made my work stronger and more nuanced. Also, the monthly potlucks he hosted for his many advisees helped me keep in touch with the work of other graduate students, and were a welcome source of community. My thanks also go to Robyn Warhol and Brian McHale, who generously offered their time to my project, and whose careful feedback and commentary have been immensely helpful in refining my ideas and arguments. I feel honored to have had the opportunity to work so closely with all of you.

The idea for this dissertation began with an independent study with Karen Leick. Karen introduced me to the middlebrow, and encouraged me to do archival research for
the first time. Without her inspiration and support, this project truly wouldn’t exist. I am grateful for her continued support and advice, as well as for that first push, all that time ago.

I would not have been able to complete this project without the help of my friends, and there are not words for the thanks I owe them. Tera Pettella, Shannon Thomas, Alexis Martina, and Mary Crone-Romanovski all contributed to this project by reading innumerable drafts, giving me pep talks, and in general rescuing me in the ways that only friends can. Without their advice, revision help, and skill at finding my cleverly hidden thesis statements, this document would never have become a full-fledged dissertation. I would also like to thank Jeni Skar, who, although she was far away, talked me down from many ledges, was always a welcome voice of reason, and could always make me laugh – even if it was at my own expense.

This project is dedicated first to my mother, Pat Dunn. I would not be where I am if not for her love and support, and her unwavering belief that it was possible. She is also the most patient and passionate teacher I know. Her strength and optimism inspire me every day, and for that I am grateful. I am also incredibly thankful for my sister, Elizabeth Clarke, who has become my friend, who always gets it, and who, when she doesn’t get it (like why someone would want to write a dissertation), is sometimes willing to take my word for it.

Finally, this project is dedicated to my husband, Robert Fisher. I am thankful that, despite graduate school and the lengthy dissertation process, he is still my best friend. Without his constant encouragement, comfort, and understanding, I would not
have been able to make it through this process. He believed I could do it even when I
didn’t, and in addition to a thousand daily things, like making sure I ate and slept, he
always made me smile. For that, and for all of the things that go unsaid, I am grateful.
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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Submerged Experimentation and the Modernist Landscape

In December of 1931, Zelda Fitzgerald published the short story, “Miss Ella” in *Scribner’s Magazine*. Using a narrative voice that at first seems to resemble the first-person anecdotal style of Fitzgerald’s other writing, “Miss Ella” tells the tragic love story of a Victorian spinster. Gradually, by including more or less covert allusions to her own works and the works of others, Fitzgerald makes a limited subset of the authorial audience aware of the narrative voice’s communal quality -- the story is narrated by the community itself, as a ploy to contain Miss Ella and the story of her rebellion. Although "Miss Ella" appears to be conventional, at least prima facie, when read through the lens of what I call submerged experimentation the story comes across as acutely critical of traditional gender norms. More broadly, a focus on submerged experimentation in writers like Fitzgerald reveals middlebrow authors' participation in the experimental impulses of highbrow modernism.

This example, which I explore in more detail in Chapter Three, illustrates the phenomenon of submerged experimentation, a covert form of narrative experimentation that allowed middlebrow authors to experiment with elements of narrative while maintaining their middlebrow status--and their readerships. Thus, my dissertation builds
on recent criticism that has returned to the question of highbrows and middlebrows, either shoring up or debunking the idea of the “great divide” between highbrow modernism and middlebrow culture of the modernist period. I argue that not only were middlebrow modernist authors aware of and informed about highbrow modernism, they actively engaged in the types of narrative experimentation that criticism has traditionally associated with highbrow modernism. In particular, I illustrate the ways in which middlebrow authors adapted and translated highbrow narrative experimentation for a middlebrow context. By highlighting modes of submerged experimentation in middlebrow texts, I offer a new understanding of the distinction between high- and middlebrow as it was understood and practiced in the modernist period. In the process, I seek to intervene in contemporary debates about the nature and scope of modernism itself. Ultimately, my reexamination of middlebrow modernism will help to reframe current understandings of how women writers helped shape modernist practices.

*Critical History and Methodology*

This dissertation will explore middlebrow texts from the modernist period through the critical lenses of postclassical narratology, feminist theory, and material-historical approaches to literature. The result of the combined approach is a project which describes and classifies the formal practices and thematic concerns of middlebrow modernists while enriching this system of classification with a rhetorical study of specific texts. Though I use a rhetorical approach, I complement that approach with empirical research aimed at reconstructing the original conditions of the texts’ reception in order to identify how and why certain texts function as they do. I bring canonical highbrow
modernist works into dialogue with middlebrow modernist works to illustrate the similarities in their experimental impulses, as well as the strategic differences influenced by audience, market, and gender. This project, thus, contributes to the “ongoing remodulation of narrative analysis” described and modeled in the 1999 volume on Narratologies (3). Feminist narrative theory provides a number of tools crucial for investigating the complex forms of experimentation employed by middlebrow authors, including the notion of divided and/or multiple audiences, the concept of narrators, readers, and texts as gendered, and, in particular, the double-voiced nature of many female-authored texts.¹ At the same time, following the lead of feminist scholars both in narratology and in modernist studies, I attend to the specific historical and cultural contexts that influenced unique forms of middlebrow experimentation.

The fields of modernist studies and narrative theory have both experienced a “renaissance” of sorts in the last several decades (Herman 1). In modernist studies, one of these developments has been the revival of an interest in the middlebrow, particularly middlebrow novels and magazine fiction. In addition, scholars in periodical studies have recently drawn attention to the tendency in modernist studies and periodical studies to focus on “little magazines” or literary publications at the expense of devoting meaningful study to more commercial publications.² My attention to the middlebrow, thus, draws on an emerging critical approach in the field that takes middlebrow practices and artifacts seriously as objects of critical interest and contributes to a new model for modernism—one that Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible refer to as a “conversational model,” as opposed to the competitive framework usually used to discuss the dynamics of
modernism (12). In narrative theory, the renaissance has included the creation of, and elaboration on, feminist narratology. By using an integrated approach that focuses both on forms of experimentation and on their historical and cultural contexts, and thus recovering and reconstructing the material conditions of publication and reception, this study will illustrate how female middlebrow authors engaged with modernist experimental techniques.

My project seeks to identify and elaborate on the models provided by feminist and rhetorical narrative theorists to explain the phenomenon of what I have termed “submerged experimentation.” Submerged experimentation describes a method by which middlebrow modernist authors engaged in covert narrative experimentation, allowing middlebrow authors to incorporate modes of highbrow modernist narrative experimentation into seemingly traditional or non-subversive texts. As a covert mode of experimentation, submerged experimentation manages to “pass” unnoticed by many, or even most, readers. Thus, many texts engaging in submerged experimentation were labeled as non-innovative or as non-subversive, which, in turn, allowed them to maintain their middlebrow status.

At issue, then, are forms of experimentation that have gone unnoticed by critics, or when noticed, have been dismissed as accidental or isolated occurrences. Submerged forms of experimentation often went unnoticed because authors exploited readers’ and critics’ expectations regarding highbrow and middlebrow literary output. At the same time, authors often used textual clues to alert a limited subset of the authorial audience to the presence of submerged experimentation. Sometimes these cues were references to
the author’s other work, and sometimes they were class- or gender-dependent references that would limit the target audience. Therefore, submerged experimentation encompasses a variety of narrative phenomena, including covertly experimental prose, the manipulation of genre conventions, and the manipulation of narrative structures such as those related to plot, theme, or characterization. The result of such covert experimentation is a text that maintains its identity or “passes” as a member of a specific category of texts while also violating or extending the limits of that category. The specific category of texts could be a particular genre of fiction, a variety of formula fiction, or some other devalued form. In this way, submerged experimentation can extend the limits of tellability (by narrating the unnarratable), introduce (or highlight the previous existence of) narrative innovation in supposedly conventional genres, or even undermine the validity of the very classification of texts which, by “passing,” it seeks to join.

This definition of submerged experimentation relies on the concept of “rhetorical passing” and the existence of Charles Morris’s fourth persona, that “collusive audience constituted by the textual wink” (Morris 230). The first persona, according to Philip Wander, is the speaker or “speaker’s intent.” In other words, it is the “I” implied by the text, and the second persona is the “you,” which is “implied, through certain features of the discourse entailing specific characteristics, roles, actions, or ways of seeing things for one who can use the language” (Wander 369). The third persona is “the ‘it’ that is not present, that is objectified in a way that ‘you’ and ‘I’ are not” (Wander 369). The fourth persona is “similar to its counterpart, the second persona” because it “is an implied
auditor of a particular ideological bent” (Morris 230). However, unlike the second persona, which “exists as a fact and an invitation” (Wander 369), the fourth persona “resembles its other counterpart, the third persona, in its partial constitution by silence” (Morris 230). Rhetorical passing, thus, “must imply two ideological positions simultaneously, one that mirrors the dupes and another that implies, via the wink, an ideology of difference” (230). In this sense, the audience for texts using passing rhetoric is always doubled or multiple.

Submerged experimentation functions in much the same way as rhetorical passing. The experimentation is incorporated in subtle ways, with cues, or “winks” directed at a discrete audience of readers who will recognize and comprehend it. Often, even that discrete audience only becomes aware of the experimentation over time, after the accumulation of cues and winks over the course of a narrative. In true modernist fashion, then, identifying submerged experimentation is largely a matter of reception, perception, and perspective.

The differences between submerged and overt modernist experimentation are primarily differences in degree, rather than kind, although at times the two phenomena can appear completely different. A typology of submerged experimentation is difficult precisely because of the many different manifestations it might have. Rather than a dichotomy of submerged versus overt experimentation, I see these two phenomena as actually occupying different ends of a continuum, with gradations between the two extremes.
The dual nature of the audience in submerged experimentation also links it to double-coding, a practice theorized by Charles Jencks, and typically associated with postmodernism. In double-coding, texts are designed for two audiences, one popular and one expert or discerning. The popular audience can enjoy the text without being aware of the details or techniques that are intended for the expert audience. This practice is very similar to submerged experimentation, but submerged experimentation is distinct primarily because I believe that most authors using submerged experimentation actively conceal their experimental techniques in some way, usually by using some sort of misdirection.

In the past several decades, scholars in a number of fields have developed theories about experimentation and the distinctions among highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. However, my dissertation illuminates a crucial issue that has been overlooked, namely, that middlebrow authors were not only aware of the highbrow modernist movement, but also actively incorporated highbrow modernist experimental practices and impulses into their work. By recovering this relationship, my project corrects the critical tradition that views middlebrow texts as lacking formal integrity and builds on conventional definitions of the middlebrow to offer a more nuanced understanding of the range of experimentation in modernist fiction. Therefore, I see this project as situated at the intersection of the fields of feminist narratology, feminist literary studies, and middlebrow recovery projects.

To be sure, the relationship between narratology and feminist literary criticism has been a vexed one--at least until the advent of feminist narratology in the mid- to late
1980s. Even in a contemporary scholarly climate that is more and more welcoming of interdisciplinarity, the conversation between feminist narratologists and feminist literary critics often remains contentious. Nonetheless, both feminist literary critics and feminist narratologists have interrogated traditional formulations of modernism (many institutionalized in the 1950’s), bringing to light neglected authors, movements, and even anti-modernist strains. My dissertation builds on these rich accounts, which highlight how until recently there has been a tendency to confine the phenomenon of experimentation to a select group of “high modernists.”

Recent interest in neglected bodies of literature from the modernist period has made middlebrow modernism a rapidly expanding field of study. However, because popular middlebrow texts often seem not to exhibit the formal characteristics associated with modernism, literary scholars have had difficulty situating them in the larger context of modernist writing practices. There is to be sure a strong desire on the part of feminist scholars to reclaim “feminine” texts (or texts authored by women) during this period, despite their deviation from expected patterns or textual norms. However, even the most conscientious feminist scholars have sometimes found themselves at a loss as to how to treat these recovered texts. It is only very recently, at the end of the 1990’s and now in the first decades of the twenty-first century, that feminist narrative theorists have begun to develop modes of analysis appropriate for the study of middlebrow or popular texts.

Since its beginnings, feminist narratology has moved from simply introducing the category of gender into narrative analysis to producing sophisticated rhetorical analyses of how texts construct readers’ gendered responses to narrative. This critical trend
informs my own project. More specifically, building on work by scholars such as Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol, my aim is to establish a basis for more sustained inquiry into the narrative structures of popular texts and those authored by women or other marginal members of society. In this way, I seek to answer the call by scholars like Lanser and Warhol for studies that will construct empirical research projects around the frameworks they’ve developed. By incorporating additional empirical and historical research, feminist narrative theorists can more specifically and precisely describe the actual conditions of publication and reception vis-à-vis middlebrow modernist works.

Because the history of the middlebrow is so fraught with tensions relating to its hasty condemnation or wholesale celebration, my project emphasizes the descriptive function of literary criticism rather than the evaluative. Peter Rabinowitz has pointed out the difficulties of applying traditional modes of literary analysis (close reading in particular) to popular texts. Robyn Warhol builds on Rabinowitz’s claim in *Having a Good Cry*, establishing feminist narratology as a corrective to traditional formalist approaches. This dissertation, in turn, takes cues from Warhol’s work and, in part, challenges such assumptions that popular (here, “middlebrow”) texts are inevitably and irrevocably inferior in formal construction to their “literary” cousins. Because of the assumption that popular works will not yield interesting conclusions if subjected to traditional modes of literary analysis, the focus in much modern feminist narrative theory (and narrative theory focusing on popular culture or genre fiction) has been on popular, women’s, or middlebrow fiction as the representation of the “realities” of the lives of women in a particular time period, or the presentation of “feminine” themes. By
contrast, although I do address the cultural conditions of publication and reception in the early twentieth century, my goal is to do so in a manner that pays particular attention to the formal practices of middlebrow texts. However, since I consider what texts say and the way they say it to be inseparable, this study will be attentive to both the act of transmission and the meaning conveyed. In middlebrow modernist texts, what the author wishes to say, which often stood in stark contrast to what she was expected to say, is essential to understanding how she goes about saying it, and vice versa. Thus, I demonstrate how texts convey particular meanings to particular readers, and in some cases, how they obscure those meanings from other readers.

While the value of integrating formal and contextual approaches may now be widely accepted by scholars of narrative, there still remains a great deal of skepticism from outside the realm of narrative theory about the possibility of a formal approach enriching, rather than impoverishing, contemporary historicist inquiries. This hesitancy is understandable, given that formalist approaches excluded context from the field of literary studies for so many years, effectively banishing marginal voices from “serious” literary study altogether. However, current trends in narrative theory present the opportunity to bring formal poetics of fiction back into the realm of culturally and contextually based literary studies. This is not to say that feminists have not engaged in useful and valuable analyses of form. Rather, I suggest that what narrative theory and feminist narratology have to offer is a carefully developed set of terms, schemata, and approaches for critiquing literature. And, as Lanser and Warhol point out, there is no longer any reason to discard this “toolbox” now that the entire field of narrative theory is
engaged in revising and reworking its core concepts to make them more conscious of contextual concerns in the production and reception of texts.

History of the Middlebrow and Highbrow

In January of 1929, the editor of Stuff and Nonsense issued an explanation and apology to readers for the cessation of the independent publication of the journal, which thereafter would be published as part of The North American Review. He ends this piece, which runs to two pages, with an assurance to his readers that “Stuff and Nonsense will continue to be a Magazine for Middlebrows. And what is a Middlebrow? He who can endure both stuff and nonsense without pain or protest is a Middlebrow. He who can not is a Highbrow or a Lowbrow. It is a perfectly obvious and practically invaluable distinction” (Rose 123). This apology, and reassurance, from an editor to his readers encapsulates the status of the Middlebrow in the decades following World War I. The editor’s need to explain and apologize indicates that he expected readers to be troubled by the disintegration of Stuff and Nonsense, and, more particularly, by its inclusion in a highbrow publication. The editor is certain that his readers are aware of the disjunction between the middlebrow publication they are accustomed to reading, and the highbrow venue it suddenly finds itself in. The disjunction is alluded to throughout the editor’s apology – he refers to the editor of The North American Review as “the Responsible Editor” and to himself and Stuff and Nonsense as “the impertinent intruder” – and recognizes readers’ understanding of the differences between the two publications and seeks to allay their potential concerns about the new combination. The editor’s assurance at the end of the piece that Stuff and Nonsense “will continue to be a Magazine for
Middlebrows” assumes that readers already know what a Middlebrow is, that they self-identify as Middlebrows, and that they are concerned about the possibility that the magazine will not continue to be aimed at them. The note is a clever rhetorical move that closes off possible protest from readers who identify as middlebrow, while at the same time addressing the regular reader of The North American Review and assuring her that the distinction between TNAR and Stuff and Nonsense remains.

The subsequent definition of Middlebrow suggests a broader, ongoing debate about how the term should be defined. Here the editor defines the Middlebrow in a positive, if lighthearted, tone; the definition implies that the Middlebrow reader is practical and has a sense of humor and the ability to laugh. This particular definition also leaves itself open to interpretation from both a highbrow and a middlebrow perspective: a middlebrow might be the practical person I just described, or a foolish person who is complacent or ignorant enough to endure stuff and nonsense (a more highbrow definition). On the one hand, the middlebrow reader is reassured that her importance and essential right-mindedness remain important and will continue to be recognized. On the other hand, the highbrow reader has been assured that the middlebrow reader and the middlebrow publication pose no real threat; they are merely a buffer zone between high and low.

More generally, definitions of Middlebrow and Highbrow, like that expressed by the editor of Stuff and Nonsense, were common in both middlebrow and highbrow publications in the 1920s and ‘30s. Depending on the “brow level” of the publication, of course, definitions varied widely. No matter how the terms were defined, however, the
terms were widespread in usage and recognition. At the same time, the difficulty of defining the middlebrow has continued to plague scholars. In their introduction to Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s, Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith note that “like most cultural classifications, the term middlebrow defies single or simple definition” (3). They also note that it tends to be defined in negative terms:

lacking the cachet and edginess of high culture, the middlebrow has also been perceived to be in want of the authenticity of the low. The middlebrow is associated with other slightly soiled middles, including the middle class and midlife. As such, middlebrow culture has been linked to conservatism, both aesthetic and social, and perceived as analogous to the masses and consumerism. (3)

Janice A. Radway voiced a similar claim, though in a different tone, in her landmark work on middlebrow culture in the United States, A Feeling for Books: “despite the traditional claim that middlebrow culture simply apes the values of high culture, it is in fact a kind of counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimated and nurtured in academic English departments for the last fifty years or so” (9-10). Perhaps most importantly, as Botshon and Goldsmith point out, is the fact that the middlebrow was “gendered: the ‘pernicious pest’ that intervened between high and low was feminized, and the authors of the fiction that ‘outrage[d] all sense and probability’ were often, like Hawthorne’s dreaded successfully scribbling women, female” (4). Middlebrow writing was, thus, in general, for the middle classes, associated with middle age, and frequently written by women for women. Middlebrow writing was also, as Radway points out in her history of middlebrow culture, commercially successful.
For my purposes, I draw on these considerations of the middlebrow to conceive of middlebrow literature as defined by its intended audience, middle-aged, middle class, and primarily women; its commercial success; the marginalized status of its authors; and its critical neglect. Both of the middlebrow novels I focus on (in chapters 2 and 4) were bestsellers, and the short story discussed in chapter 3 was published in a high circulation magazine by a well-known celebrity author. All three authors were known for publishing popular works, largely, but not exclusively, read by women. My own study, then, will focus on the literary output of female middlebrow writers\textsuperscript{11}, in order to study their relationship to the wider ecology of modernist narrative experimentation.

The study of the middlebrow in literature, as my earlier discussion of feminist literary theory illustrates, is fraught with complexity and disagreement. The relationship, and distinction, between high art and art produced for a wider audience has always been difficult to define. In the field of modernist studies, controversy over middlebrow fiction is magnified by the stance traditionally attributed to highbrow modernists in relation to middlebrow fiction. It used to be taken for granted that the “high” modernists (Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, etc.) perceived the middlebrow to be a new and menacing threat to the cultural health of the U.S. and Great Britain, and therefore reacted against popular art. Now, scholars are debating the merits of claims about this “reactionary” stance on the part of highbrow modernist writers. Recent scholarship has revealed a more complex relationship between highbrow modernism and the “slightly soiled middles” that they ostensibly rejected. While high modernists might have seen the middlebrow as a new threat to art, in fact the middlebrow had been in existence, and
causing concern, for at least half a century before the modernists began to issue 
manifestos calling for its demise. Thus, whereas the high modernists claimed that the 
inferiority of middlebrow fiction represented a new threat to the general reading public, it 
was actually a confluence of ongoing changes in politics, literary taste, and economics 
that made the middlebrow an ideal villain in the modernist literary landscape. Hence my 
study adds to the work of scholars who have complicated Andreas Huyssen’s (in)famous 
account of the “great divide” and how it figured in postmodern representational practices.

Despite high modernists’ concern about the new threat of the middlebrow, in fact 
the middlebrow had existed for nearly fifty years before it was christened “middlebrow” 
in the popular press. The adoption of universal education in Britain in 1870, as well as 
increased interest in “common schools” in the United States during the last half of the 
nineteenth century, combined with new production methods which made publishing 
books faster, easier, and cheaper, led to an explosion in both the literate reading public 
and the availability and accessibility of reading material. As Joseph McAleer shows in 
Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914-1950, prior to 1850 the publishing 
industry focused on two types of popular (or widely marketable) novels: the lowbrow 
“yellow-backs” and penny-dreadfuls, and “classic” popular fiction, which included 
inexpensive editions of classics and “second-rank novels” (mainly sensation novels).12 
However, in the 1880’s and 90’s, the rising middle class began to attempt to “cleanse” 
the literature of the lowbrow by publishing “wholesome” fiction as an antidote to the 
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12 McAleer reports that by the early twentieth century, it had
become difficult to distinguish between what had previously been clearly demarcated segments of the publishing industry. The increasing ambiguity of who was reading what, rather than the newness of the middlebrow, was likely a major factor contributing to the outcry against it at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The outcry began with complaints about the declining quality of periodical fiction. As early as 1890, an article appeared in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, an American publication, lamenting the impact of “newspaper fiction” on the reading public. In this article, William Westall complains of the motivations of publishers in their selections of material (one publisher insists: “I buy the author; I don’t buy the story” and “I would rather give four thousand dollars for a [well-known author] than forty dollars for an intrinsically better story by an author without a name”); he also laments the public’s lack of discrimination concerning, if not outright rejection of, “high-class” fiction. Westall’s critique of the middlebrow falls in line with the commonly cited, but largely unsubstantiated, claims about the formal poverty of middlebrow fiction.

At the same time that critiques of this sort were being voiced, another strain in the conversation was decrying the social implications of the novels’ content. In a letter to the editor of the *Dial*, which was published in the United States, entitled “The ‘Best-Seller’ and the Genteel Atmosphere,” published March 1, 1910, Prudence Pratt McConn complained that authors of “genteel fiction” were doing their job all too well. She argued that, although best-sellers contain “unbelievably trite quotations, and repartee that would cause nausea in a half-way good conversationalist” and “duchesses flirting in a manner that would be charming in a shop-girl,” these novels are successful precisely because they
create an atmosphere of gentility while depicting characters that are closer to the (presumably middle-class) readers themselves than the upper echelons of society. McConn wittily refers to the best-selling novelist as “not a story-writer, but a shrewd psychologist” who nevertheless is “a genius” capable of creating an “unquestionably fashionable” setting with characters “dressed in all the trappings and suits of affluence, but underneath they shall be not such people as one really finds in well-bred society but – the readers themselves.” The idea that middlebrow fiction aimed to represent, more or less accurately, the middle-class reader rather than the “better” segments of society, led many to believe that this trend would ultimately lead to the decline of the middle classes. Since the middleclass was sometimes viewed as only marginally separated from the working class, this possibility seemed to pose a very real and troubling threat to Victorian readers invested in the uplift of the middle classes.\(^\text{13}\) What is also implied, but never stated explicitly, in McConn’s comments is a problematic assumption about the female reader – namely, that she is someone who wishes to see a duchess flirting like a shop-girl. Thus, it is female readers, and the (presumably female) novelists who so shrewdly catered to their ostensible whims, that raised the concerns of the critics. Over time, these types of specific complaints were generalized to include the entire category of the middlebrow.

The faithfulness of middlebrow novels to the “reality” of their middleclass readership that troubled Pratt McConn was one of the things middlebrow fiction was repeatedly critiqued for, particularly by proponents of “highbrow” modernist fiction. As realism fell out of favor in highbrow circles toward the end of the nineteenth century and
at the beginning of the twentieth century, novels that continued to aim for verisimilitude and the accurate documentation of social circumstances began to be judged more and more harshly. As Nicola Humble notes in *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*,

> It is not (as many critics would have us assume) that novelists, and particularly female novelists, suddenly started writing meretricious, class obsessed fripperies in the years after the first world war, but rather that the status of the realist novel was dramatically altered by the coming to public consciousness of the modernist and associated avant-garde movements.

(11)

So, while middlebrow novelists drew on representational techniques pioneered so successfully by realist writers, they continued to use those techniques even as critical opinions of realism waned, and therefore began to attract the condemnation of a new school of literature seeking to “elevate” the concerns of fiction. Yet as Humble argues, middlebrow novels, particularly those by women, constitute careful commentaries on and analyses of class relations in modern society. Indeed, this study will show that female middlebrow authors engaged in social criticism that was similar to, and frequently harsher than, the criticism offered by their highbrow counterparts. In addition, I illustrate that rather than simply continuing to use older techniques associated with 19th-century realism, many female middlebrow writers worked to combine realist techniques with highbrow modernist techniques in new ways to achieve new effects.

Even before World War I, literary critics were noting what they considered a “new trend” in magazine fiction. In 1910, Henry Seidel Canby, who would go on to become editor of the Book of the Month Club, described the “journalizing” of short stories that was occurring in popular magazines of the time.  

One of the chief faults of these stories, according to Canby, was their attempt to adapt literature to the style and
purpose of the “new magazine.” Canby explains that he has nothing against the new incarnation of the magazine; he sees it as a means of obtaining the news and information about the world. The problem comes, for Canby, when the magazines include short stories and poetry that make no attempt to “refine upon life as literature must.” Rather, this new style of fiction has more in common with the news than with “real literature.” In Canby’s comments on short stories, we can see the prevailing attitudes of the time. Although it was rarely stated explicitly, the literary establishment recoiled from the mixture of verbal art and the lowly concerns of the real world. In their view, the magazines of the nineteenth century had taken a more artistic approach to life, and therefore the fiction included in them had not suffered from its close contact with the world of the magazines. With the new “journalistic” style, there was an emphasis on reporting the events of the world as they were, and on satisfying public tastes, rather than attempting to elevate or refine public tastes. However, as Mark S. Morrisson points out in *The Public Face of Modernism*, the idyllic past referred to by high modernists was illusory. They referred to an almost mythical time when the public sphere was “whole” and wholesome, and hadn’t yet been degraded by the intrusion of so many dissenting voices. In addition, as many critics have shown, many highbrows themselves were engaged in incorporating the concerns of the everyday into works of high art.

Despite claims by critics such as Canby, the magazines of the nineteenth century had indeed engaged with everyday life and capitalism. However, the change that critics such as Canby were reacting to was the move away from the “genteel” tradition. The genteel tradition developed in the nineteenth century in response to ideas of social
progress and social responsibility. Genteel fiction sought to elevate readers’ tastes in fiction as well as improve them morally and socially. With the rise of cheaper methods of producing and distributing periodicals, the use of such periodicals for the uplift of the lower and working classes seemed like a natural step. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosophy of literature seemed to both evolve from this position and drastically diverge from it. On the one hand, literary circles were anxious to influence public taste. Authors like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Ford Maddox Ford published essays and produced journals in an effort to cultivate a higher literary sensibility in the reading public. Morrisson explains that, in contrast with the traditional view of high modernists rejecting the general public altogether, “British and American modernists were initially optimistic – they did not display the pessimism about the role of art and literature in the public sphere commonly ascribed to modernism” even though they were often unable to use these opportunities as successfully as they’d hoped (203). Leonard Diepeveen corroborates this claim in “I Can Have More Than Enough Power to Satisfy Me,” showing that T.S. Eliot actively attempted to shape the tastes of “normal” readers by using a subversive mix of everyday language and sophisticated rhetoric in his essays. Rather than using the image of the aloof highbrow modernist poet, Diepeveen describes a figure invested in shaping public taste and opinion about art and literature. Finally, the fact that Canby later became one of the main figures in the Book of the Month Club phenomenon further illustrates that the highbrow literary realm and the middlebrow realm were not as distant as he himself implied in 1910.
Although discussions about the category of the middlebrow had been going on for some time, the first uses of the term “middlebrow” date to the mid 1920’s. The term appears in a 1925 issue of the British magazine *Punch*, as well as a 1926 article in the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* article is particularly interesting, since the author does not appear to treat “middlebrow” as an established term. The title of the piece, “Mezzobrows,” refers to another (unnamed) author who has applied the term to this new and perplexing “class,” which the author feels has only just begun to be recognized and theorized. While the author of “Mezzobrows” concedes that the literary world cannot do without the middlebrow market for their work, he disdainfully explains the position of the middlebrow:

> We can’t all be highbrow any more than we can all be Early English. Few of us would consent to be grouped with the low-browed chimpanzee, though he is now said to be our nearest blood relation. But there is a vast area between the two, where a great multitude may dwell, neither too proud nor too humble to be accepted. They are not a distinguished body, even in their own most complacent judgment of themselves, but they are useful. (“Mezzobrows”)

In this short passage, the author dismisses the lowbrow as merely the “chimpanzee” of the literary world, while the middlebrow occupies that undefined, but vast, space between animalism and civilized culture. For this author, the chief asset of middlebrow readers is their ability and willingness to buy books, unlike the intelligentsia who “send to each other presentation copies of their immortal works so as to be able to say ill-natured things of each other.” Thus, while the commercial nature of the middlebrow and the consumerist standpoint of middlebrow readers were criticized by
highbrow critics, those same critics also recognized and accepted (albeit grudgingly) their essential place in the publishing industry.

If highbrow publications and critics devoted considerable time and ink to divining the nature of the middlebrow, readers and critics of all categories put at least as much energy into definitions of the highbrow. The American monthly *The Forum* conducted a contest in which readers submitted disparaging and glorifying definitions of “Highbrow.” The editors treat the term as the subject of an oft repeated and well-known conversation, and as such they set the ground rules for their competition:

[…] we have eliminated the oft-repeated definition that “a highbrow is a person educated beyond his intellect”. We have regretfully refrained from quoting the many clever jibes at current magazines, though we’ve let one or two about *The Forum* creep in. And, after all, it is rather superficial to catalogue a high – or a lowbrow by his bill of fare. Many a genius, we feel quite sure, has ordered corned beef and cabbage; but there, we are indicating that a genius is a highbrow! (Anonymous 744)

The list of winning definitions contains only two “anti-highbrow” definitions, one that seems relatively neutral, and five that glorify the highbrow. Even more interesting than the ratio, however, are the ways in which these definitions delineate the highbrow from the “less fortunate many.” Often these “less fortunate many” are defined in turn by their relationship to consumer culture. One typical list of contrasts runs:

A highbrow is one who in any plane of society typifies a culture beyond that of him who hurls the disparaging epithet: to a hill man, one who uses a napkin at dinner; to a lover of jazz, one who frequents grand opera; to one who sees only building material in marble, one who finds beauty in sculpture; to one who sees in cloud and sunshine only so many bushels an acre, one who paints a golden sunset; to one who reads only a daily paper, one who appreciates Robert Browning and *The Forum*. (745)
The key distinctions here are between those who focus on material production – the farmer and the builder -- as opposed to those who look beyond “mere” production and consumption to the beauty of art. These distinctions, however, are almost all implicated in a classed mode of consumption; attending the grand opera, having leisure and luxury to paint and read and patronize art are all activities that define one as highbrow for this contestant. Thus, this definition simultaneously claims that a highbrow can exist in “any plane of society” and clearly limits highbrow activities to those requiring leisure and income.

Middlebrow was frequently simply code for “bestseller” and vice versa. In fact, highbrow publications were often troubled by the fact that readers seemed unable to tell the difference. In one such instance, a writer for the *New York Times*, invested in delineating the difference between “highbrow” and “popular,” complains that no one “certainly, would think of counting the ‘Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse’ among those novels that have the familiar quality – or lack of quality – belonging to the typical ‘best seller.’”\(^{19}\) However, the writer seems puzzled by the fact that, when translated into English, this work was immensely popular despite fulfilling "all the requirements that go to the making of the best kind – in a purely literary sense – of fiction.” Given the popular sentiment against the highbrow, it is no wonder that this author seems surprised by the popularity of a “quality” text. Furthermore, the author seems particularly distressed by the fact that readers did not perceive the difference between this text and the “normal” best seller. He, in fact, goes to great lengths to show that it was the subject matter (the war), rather than “the intrinsic literary merit found in such superlative measure in the
novel,” that accounted for the novel’s popularity. The author is therefore able to conclude, with relief, that “as an authentic instance of immediate popularity achieved by a work of fiction belonging to the highest type of literature the masterpiece of Ibanez cannot be adduced as an altogether typical one.” Given the common lamentations of the decline in public taste, this article seems remarkable in its investment in proving that there is in fact a difference between “highbrow” and popular fiction, and that the public can tell the difference and prefers the latter. Any case that seems to prove otherwise must be attributed to some sort of “hoax,” misdirection, or misreading.20

A middlebrow review similarly addresses the distinction between highbrow and middlebrow (here coded as works that “sell”). In the May 25, 1922 issue of Life, a review comments on the “selfishness” of the intellectual, claiming that popularity, more than formal quality or lack thereof, determines the intellectual’s responses to literature:

Intellectuals are, by choice, the most selfish people on earth. They hate to share anything with the public. Popularity, they contend, is the greatest curse on earth, and anyone who dares to achieve it is instantly ostracized. Sinclair Lewis’s “Main Street” and A.S.M. Hutchinson’s “If Winter Comes” were hailed as works of art when they first appeared, and when their authors enjoyed comparative obscurity; but the moment these novels began to sell, and to run into extra editions, the boys with the Eiffel brows instantly dropped Lewis and Hutchinson from the lists of the elect, and branded them as “hacks.” (29)

These discussions show that the terms highbrow and middlebrow were not only in use in the modernist period, but were also the subject of lively debate in the literary and popular press. It is also important to note that, despite the commentator's remark in the review from Life (“the boys with the Eiffel brows”), women’s writing was an important part of the highbrow modernist movement. Although feminist scholars have pointed out
the ways in which women’s contributions have been minimized in accounts of modernism, in fact women authors figured prominently in both highbrow and middlebrow publishing circles. In this project I will compare women writers who were, in their own time, labeled either highbrow or middlebrow. The historical usage of these terms is clearly complex and varied over time and heavily dependent upon context. My usage of these terms will reflect the complexity of their historical usage, acknowledging how the terms were originally used by the groups to describe themselves. Thus, I will use middlebrow in the more forgiving way in which middlebrow publications tended to use the term, and similarly I will use “highbrow” in the ways in which highbrow publications tended to use the term. Middlebrow in this project will denote texts that were distributed by large, popular, presses, had large print runs and wide readership, and were marketed to and read by primarily, if not exclusively women. The middlebrow authors discussed were well-known in their time, and frequently discussed in the popular, and occasionally in the highbrow, press. Highbrow will be used to denote authors and works that were recognized during this period as part of the “new school” of experimental fiction. These authors and works were discussed in both the highbrow and middlebrow press as representative of a new trend in literature, marked by recognizable departures from traditional prose styles. This approach will avoid the pejorative connotations that were sometimes attached to each term during (and after) the period at issue.

*Modernist Experimentation*

The discussion of highbrow art continued from the pages of contemporary middlebrow and highbrow publications into criticism that spanned the twentieth and now
twenty-first centuries. Modernists are frequently acknowledged as formal innovators: from Ezra Pound’s exhortation to “make it new” to Virginia Woolf’s call for a more inward-looking, psychological fiction, the high modernists were self-consciously invested in experimentation – particularly formal experimentation. One of the reasons that the idea of the clear high/middle divide has persisted is that the assumption has long been that “real art” of the modernist period is immediately recognizable by its surface manipulation of form. Examples of these surface manipulations, including defamiliarization, fragmented narratives, stream of consciousness technique, allusiveness, and obscurity, are commonly adduced as typical, almost necessary characteristics of modernist art. Defamiliarization in particular is important to my argument in this project. Defamiliarization, often viewed as a cultural necessity in the wake of the dislocating and disorienting effects of the First World War, manifests itself in modernism as the presentation of familiar things (often from the realm of the unarratable) in radically unfamiliar ways. Shklovsky famously described this process as “estranging objects and complicating form” in order to make “perception long and ‘laborious’” (6). Virginia Woolf articulated the same concept in her essay, “Modern Fiction:”

for the moderns […] the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp […] The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all; and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room we see how complete the story is, how profound. (152-3)

The “radical unfamiliarity,” or period of adjustment, is one of the effects of experimentation that seems to require an overtly experimental presentation. In other
words, if a reader is not conscious of the defamiliarizing strategies of an author, he or she cannot encounter the subject of the text in a new way. This conceptualization of modernist methods makes the very idea of a “covert” experimentalism, or experimentalism that could go unnoticed, seem paradoxical. My project requires a rethinking of these assumptions, and illustrates that in middlebrow modernist narratives innovative formal and thematic elements can operate covertly, while still retaining their defamiliarizing effects. In fact, it is precisely the gradual nature of the process Woolf and Shklovsky both describe that make it possible.

In order to place submerged experimentation within the landscape of modernist literary experimentation, it is necessary to first chart that landscape. The experimental techniques in modernist fiction are famously varied in both type and degree. In some cases, central contributors to a magazine or review dedicated to “real art” held radically different views as to what that meant. The conflict between Dora Marsden and Ezra Pound, described in The Public Face of Modernism, exemplifies the disagreements that sometimes arose. Marsden’s commitment to individual intellect repeatedly clashed with what she considered the “causes” espoused by the imagists and other high modernists who published in the Egoist.

Even as the actual political allegiances of highbrows might be difficult to retrace and untangle (being naturally fluid), the public perception of the political affiliations of the highbrow was certainly mixed. Among highbrow writers, there was often a fine distinction between addressing or engaging political matters and overtly promoting a particular social agenda. Overt propagandizing was typically unacceptable, even in
circles where political engagement was the norm. In addition, as critics like Andreas Huyssen have pointed out, the many communities of “real art” producers often had radically different agendas. Huyssen makes the distinction between the avant-garde and the highbrow, claiming that while what critics now term “highbrow modernism” promoted art for art’s sake, parallel movements (Dada, surrealism, the Russian avant-garde) were invested in precisely the opposite: the creation of a political art capable of transforming everyday life. Huyssen points to the persistence of assumptions of a high/low divide as evidence of the avant-garde’s failure. At the same time, scholars of the modernist period have convincingly argued that even the supposedly apolitical forms of modernism take on political implications through their radical manipulations of style and structure. To further complicate matters, the political orientation of highbrow modernism also changed over time.

While Huyssen’s discussion of the “great divide” is valuable for its recognition of the complexity of the modernist “high art” community, subsequent critics have pointed out that in fact the “divide” was far more complex than Huyssen describes. Throughout the modernist period, the relationships among the avant-garde, the highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow were fluctuating and increasingly complex. As the contributions to Dettmar’s and Watt’s volume on Marketing Modernisms illustrate, there was a great degree of overlap among modernist aesthetic projects and thoroughly “middlebrow” advertising tactics in British and American contexts. In addition, as Morrisson points out in The Public Face of Modernism, which focuses on highbrow publishing in Britain, America, and the continent, many “highbrows” worked side-by-
side with avant-garde and middlebrow producers of culture, particularly in the early days of the modernist movement. It was through the failure of such joint ventures as *Blast*, *Egoist*, and the *English Review* that many highbrow artists came to the conclusion that their aesthetic goals were incompatible with both the overtly political agendas of the avant-garde and the supposedly wholeheartedly commercial agendas of the middlebrow.

This dissertation is primarily concerned with the interaction between highbrow artists and middlebrow artists, as I’ve defined them above. I will not include extensive discussion of the avant-garde or lowbrow artists. Neither will I discuss writers working in the domain of genre fiction (mystery, romance, etc, each of which has its own internal “brow” levels), since my goal here is to establish a way of understanding the relationship between the highbrow and middlebrow--an interpretive model that could then be extended into these other areas in future studies. As Karen Leick has pointed out in “Popular Modernism: Little Magazines and the American Daily Press,” scholarship on the modernist period has failed to note the extent to which middlebrow publications and readers were engaged with highbrow modernism. Scholars have increasingly noted highbrow modernism’s tendency to borrow from popular culture, but they have not, until very recently, begun to note the corresponding trend among middlebrow artists. This dissertation will show that middlebrow authors embraced many of the experimental practices of their highbrow contemporaries, and, for reasons that I go on to explore in my next section and the chapters that follow, modify them to make them less overt.

The other key category that this dissertation investigates is gender. All of the authors discussed here are female, and the experimentation is therefore inflected in
distinctly gendered ways. Just as Leick points out that scholarship has failed to note the extent to which middlebrow readers were engaged with highbrow modernism, Jayne E. Marek notes, in *Women Editing Modernism*, the extent to which women shaped modernist literature not only through their roles in editing and publishing, but also through their own writing practices. Yet even as she argues that “women had far more to do with the support and evolution of modernism than has been generally acknowledged” (2), Marek draws attention to the “substantial differences between the experiences of male and female modernists” despite the fact that many of the figures she discusses were part of elite highbrow circles (2). This project expands on Marek’s claim, examining the experiences and contributions of female middlebrow authors and how they participated in the evolution of the modernist movement.

*Outline of the Chapters*

In the following chapters, I will examine middlebrow and highbrow texts in parallel in order to reveal similarities in the experimental impulses of highbrow and middlebrow writers, and also to explore other manifestations and implications of submerged experimentation. Middlebrow authors engaged in submerged experimentation for reasons as varied as the authors themselves. Some of the authors I discuss engaged in submerged rather than overt forms of experimentation in order to be more marketable for a mainstream middlebrow audience, an audience that often wanted to read about highbrow publications in the mass media, but did not want to struggle with highbrow experimental prose in its leisure reading. Other authors used submerged experimentation in order to meet the individually imposed gendered requirements for
authorship. Yet others used covert modes of experimentation to further a social or political agenda. Of course, any given author’s motivations for engaging in a particular form of experimentation are necessarily complex and multiple. In part, I have chosen to discuss these specific authors precisely because they are excellent examples of the wide range of motivations that caused middlebrow authors to choose to engage in submerged rather than overt forms of experimentation.

My first case-study, “Thematizing the Unnarratable in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Margaret Ayer Barnes’s Edna His Wife,” focuses on a type of submerged experimentation that is particularly fascinating in modernist narrative: the act of narrating the previously unnarratable. In this chapter I will focus, in particular, on ways that authors employed submerged experimentation to narrate aspects of experience that were previously considered too trivial to be narratable. The chapter pairs Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Margaret Ayer Barnes’s Edna, His Wife, showing that in both middlebrow and highbrow contexts there was a widespread tendency to expand the limits of what was considered tellable or reportable by including “trivial” domestic concerns. In my discussion of Mrs. Dalloway, I explore how the image of Clarissa mending her dress and the image of her successful party become central to the novel’s representation of art. Similarly, middlebrow authors often constructed texts focusing on the “trivial.” Margaret Ayer Barnes’s Edna, His Wife, a 1935 bestseller with a first printing of 50,000 copies, is a particularly salient example. In Barnes’s novel, the trivial is all that matters—the novel focuses almost exclusively on Edna’s daily domestic concerns. Even WWI and the Great Depression become merely backdrops for Edna’s personal and domestic crises.
I argue that Barnes employs submerged experimentation in order to meet the requirements of her audience and the gendered expectations placed upon her as a female middlebrow author. By discussing in parallel these two methods of treating the unnarratable, this chapter will illustrate a shared desire to recast the “appropriate” subject of art in supposedly non-experimental popular literature and “purely aesthetic” highbrow texts. I argue that, surprisingly, it is the middlebrow novel that is more pessimistic about the creative or redemptive possibilities of the domestic.

Chapter 3, “Intertextual Constructions of Character: H.D.’s Asphodel and Zelda Fitzgerald’s ‘Miss Ella,’” explores a form of submerged experimentation that involves the intersection of intertextuality and characterization. I examine H.D.’s novel Asphodel and Zelda Fitzgerald’s short story “Miss Ella” to illustrate how the intertextual impulses of even the most experimental highbrow artists were also present in middlebrow authors. H.D. traces a genealogy of character types to suggest the inadequacy of existing models of female character. H.D.’s novel explores the process whereby an exceptional female artist draws on a range of intertextual references in attempts to construct a narrative of her own identity. In contrast, Fitzgerald’s story illustrates the impossibility of such a task for an average woman. In “Miss Ella,” Fitzgerald establishes an intertextual relationship with William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” in order to highlight the limited agency available to female characters. In “Miss Ella,” the reader follows the failed love affair of a young southern girl in the 1890s to her days as a spinster. Told through an ambiguous narrative point of view, the short story raises important questions about agency and control over one's own narrative. In Asphodel, the protagonist is ultimately able to exert
a great deal of control over her narrative, while in “Miss Ella,” the protagonist’s control is much more limited. In this case, I argue that Fitzgerald uses submerged experimentation in order to avoid reprisals from the authority figures in her life. It is well-documented that Fitzgerald’s writing was a contested issue between Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, and that Scott worked with Zelda’s psychiatrists to restrict the types of writing Zelda was able to produce. In order to comment on this power dynamic, and to engage in the type of “serious” writing that Scott designated as his own domain, Zelda had to make her experimentation covert.

Chapter 4, “The Tested Woman Plot in Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence and Winifred Holtby’s South Riding,” focuses on a specific plot type in two pairs of texts. The chapter reads Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence as a rewriting of Wharton’s own use of the tested woman plot in The House of Mirth. The second half of the chapter pairs Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre with Winifred Holtby’s South Riding, and argues that Holtby invokes Brontë’s version of the tested woman plot in order to cue readers to expect a certain type of plot, only to transform the novel from a romantic plot into a plot featuring a strong, independent female character. In doing so, Holtby simultaneously transforms the traditional tested woman plot of an iconic romance into a plot of social activism and change. Thus, Holtby’s experimentations with plot are connected to her reasons for choosing to use covert rather than overt modes of experimentation. By choosing to make changes to the plot type slowly and subtly over the course of the novel, Holtby heightens the impact of the change on her readers, and creates the maximum effect, particularly for those readers most inclined to long for a romantic ending– with
those readers being perhaps also the ones most disinclined to hope for an unattached strong, political, female protagonist. In other words, I argue that Holtby used this form of submerged experimentation in order to advance a feminist political agenda while avoiding the possibility of alienating a middlebrow audience that accepted conventional gender roles.

Finally, my conclusion explores potential applications of submerged experimentation outside the realm of the middlebrow. I argue that submerged experimentation can illuminate a number of other publishing contexts, including the avant garde, lowbrow, genre fiction, and the Harlem Renaissance. I place Nella Larsen’s *Passing* in dialogue with Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* to show how the concept of submerged experimentation could enrich our understanding of the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and the broader ecology of modernist experimentation. In addition, I explore the relationship between submerged experimentation and rhetorical passing in more detail, in order to illustrate the differences between the two phenomena and further explore the contribution that research on submerged experimentation can make to the field of narrative theory.

1 As Kathy Mezei says, the essence of feminist narratology is “the context of how stories are told, by whom, and for whom” (1). Ruth Page argues that “feminist narratology is not then a separate set of feminist narrative models, but is better understood as the feminist critique of narratology (in its broad sense) which operates on the basis of applications of narrative theory to a range of texts that goes beyond the corpus originally drawn upon by the early structuralist work” (5). Page also proposes a postmodern feminist narratology that is plural and integrative, and which mirrors the interdisciplinary approach found in other areas of narratological studies.

Churchill and McKible argue that, while competition and disagreement certainly existed, conversation was one of the most influential aspects of modernism. Churchill and McKible attempt to create a new framework by “incorporating rather than rejecting a “Great War” theory of modernism […] moving toward a “great party” model, one that duly recognizes the era’s sense of urgency, mechanization, and conflict but also addresses modernism’s spirit of creativity, conviviality, and playfulness” (13).

Peter Rabinowitz elaborates on the concept of rhetorical passing in “Betraying the Sender: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts.”

This desire is in large part following the trend begun by Elaine Showalter – that of devoting entire studies, indeed, entire volumes, or fields of study, to the literary production of women. Also, I should stress here that I do not mean to equate “feminine” texts with texts authored by women; rather I am identifying two approaches to the feminist recovery project.

Feminist narratology has developed, to a certain extent, as a means by which to address the issue of perceived formal poverty in traditionally feminine or female-authored texts. Thus, as Robyn Warhol points out in “Guilty Cravings: What Feminism Can do for Narrative Theory,” it is no longer contradictory to speak of “feminist narratology,” but it is not always clear what the practice of such a discipline should look like. Feminist narratology has moved in many directions at once – many feminist narratologists, particularly in the early years of the union between feminism and narratology, set goals of simply introducing considerations of gender into the discussion of the structural features of narrative. While it may seem a modest goal in retrospect, this achievement of feminist narrative theorists, along with the work of cultural historians and other scholars invested in enriching narrative theory, was monumental in terms of the expansion it allowed within the field of narrative studies. However, it is safe to say that there is now something resembling a consensus in the field of narrative theory, namely that context does matter, and that introducing context (gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc.) does not distract us from, but rather strengthens and complicates our understanding of, key aspects of narrative.

Warhol’s essay “Guilty Cravings,” is a particularly strong model for future studies. In her analysis of a thirty second scene from a popular soap opera, she illustrates the very productive possibilities of applying formal analysis to the most “ephemeral” of texts.
By “hasty reclamation” and “wholesale celebration” I don’t mean to imply the existence of a hierarchy within middlebrow literature, from which careless critics chose “lesser” works. Rather, I refer to the understandable move to reclaim texts based solely on the sex or gender of their authors, with little regard for a systematic analysis of formal features.

I will work to differentiate the often confused terms “popular,” “women’s,” and “middlebrow” later in this chapter.

Middlebrow writing as a whole certainly supports Radway’s claim, but as my study shows, much middlebrow writing was engaged in narrative experimentation as well.

While many of the primary sources used in this introduction are from American periodicals, the dissertation as a whole will deal with both American and British middlebrow texts and contexts. There was a great deal of overlap in the middlebrow culture of the two countries, with American periodicals quoting British periodicals on the latest and best novels, and vice versa. There were of course national differences in the inflection of the definitions of middlebrow and highbrow, but, as my study shows, the middlebrow’s covert adaptation of highbrow experimentation (as well as the highbrow’s borrowing of formal and thematic features from the middlebrow) was quite similar in both countries.

McAleer uses the term “second-rank” seemingly unself-consciously, along with terms like “inferior,” to describe middlebrow fiction. This assumption in an otherwise meticulous and objective account of the publishing industry indicates the degree to which contemporary evaluations of the middlebrow shape understandings of recent literary history.

It is interesting to note that this desire for uplift was not limited to the upper classes. While the upper classes sought to raise the awareness and taste of the middle classes, the middle class sought to “rescue” the working class from its own ignorance and bad taste.


Morrisson cites Ford Madox Ford and Harold Monro as examples of early modernists who espoused “a myth of a public sphere in decline that has not stood up to historical scrutiny” (9).

Morrisson specifically discusses the Habermassian vision of the modern public sphere as a degradation of public culture. Morrisson points out that the ideal times to which Habermas and others refer was in fact a time when only a select few were able to
take part in the public sphere, suggesting that claims that the modern public sphere is degraded reflect the sort of elitism of which high modernists are often accused.

17 “What is a Highbrow?” *Forum* (1926).

18 This distribution is not necessarily representative of actual public opinion toward highbrows, since *Forum* was widely considered a highbrow publication.


20 In fact, the author follows this discussion with an example of a similar “hoax” – Edgar Allan Poe’s “report” of a trans-Atlantic balloon voyage that was believed by readers.

21 Here I mean publications that self-identified as highbrow or middlebrow (as in the case of *Forum* and *Stuff and Nonsense*) during the period at issue.

Chapter 2

Thematizing the Unnarratable in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Margaret Ayer Barnes’s Edna His Wife

“But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.”
~ A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf

Literary highbrow modernism is often associated with an affinity for the obscene or the outrageous. Accounts of obscenity trials, shocking quotes, and frank explorations of sexuality frequently take center stage in accounts of literary modernism. What all of these accounts point to is the modernist urge to expand the limits of the narratable. At the same time, highbrow modernists were also invested in expanding the limits of the narratable in the opposite direction: toward the subnarratable. If the obscene represents the antinarratable, that which is unnarratable because of its socially unacceptable status, then the subnarratable is considered unnarratable because it is too trivial or mundane to deserve mention. Modernists famously invested narrative time and energy into traditionally subnarratable subjects, typically using defamiliarization to force readers to see the everyday in radically new ways. In this chapter, I address Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway as an example of a highbrow modernist work that uses the subnarratable. I
contend that Woolf’s aim is not to “transcend” the everyday as other modernists aimed to, but rather to illustrate the importance of the everyday in its own right. I pair Woolf’s novel with Margaret Ayer Barnes’s middlebrow novel *Edna His Wife*, which illustrates a similar emphasis on the mundane and the everyday, but takes the focus on the everyday to the extreme. By discussing in parallel these two methods of treating the subnarratable, this chapter will illustrate a shared desire to recast the “appropriate” subject of art in a supposedly non-experimental popular work and a “purely aesthetic” highbrow text.

Both Woolf and Barnes focus their novels on traditionally feminine domestic activities and realms of existence, opposing their projects to those that valued masculine pursuits and notions of achievement and heroism. Indeed, Woolf noted the masculinist nature of fiction in general, and argued that a patriarchal society had resulted in a world in which traditionally male attributes were valued above traditionally feminine attributes -- Woolf also argued that there is nothing inherently more exciting or heroic about men's public activities than those that women pursue inside the home. Rather, because men's activities have been valued in daily life, they have therefore been deemed more worthy of telling in literature as well. Perceiving this imbalance in the subjects of fiction, both Woolf and Barnes endeavor to re-center literature on what would traditionally be considered the realm of the mundane, the trivial, and the everyday. Woolf exemplifies highbrow experimentation with innovative techniques and her implicit comparison between Clarissa and the decidedly not mundane Septimus Smith. Furthermore, Woolf establishes strong analogies between Clarissa’s domestic activities and her own artistic activities, thus celebrating Clarissa’s apparently mundane work. On the other hand,
Barnes submerges her experimentation within the conventions of the middlebrow marriage plot, and emphasizes Edna’s confinement by the demands of marriage and its accompanying domesticity, rendering her not a role model but a tragic figure. I argue that, surprisingly, it is the middlebrow novel that is most pessimistic about the creative or redemptive possibilities of the domestic, which suggests that we need to refine our critical understanding of highbrow and middlebrow fiction to account for how narrative experimentation is linked to the domestic.

Defining the Narratable

The ways in which Woolf’s and Barnes’s experimentation expand the narratable are illuminated by Robyn Warhol’s essay, "Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film." Outlining a new set of definitions for what can and cannot be narrated in fiction and film, Warhol builds on Gerald Prince's 1988 definitions in "The Disnarrated," just as Prince builds on the work of D.A. Miller and Peter Brooks. Warhol's project is to disentangle the mass of possibilities included under Prince's definition of the "unnarratable." Specifically, Warhol's definitions of the unnarratable fall into four categories: "that which according to a given narrative, (1) 'needn't be told (the subnarratable),' (2) 'can't be told (the supranarratable),' (3) 'shouldn't be told (the antinarratable), and (4) 'wouldn't be told (the paranarratable)'" (222). My discussion here will focus on the subnarratable and the antinarratable-- although, as we will see, certain narrative events blur the distinctions between categories. Arguably, the incorporation of the antinarratable is one of modernism's most striking innovations. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* offers examples of both
sub- and anti-narration in the first few pages. The opening scene of *Ulysses* features Buck Mulligan shaving, an act typically considered subnarratable. However, in this instance, Joyce further frames this event both through Mulligan's own (antinarratable) caricature of a Catholic mass and through the narrator's own inflated language. This is quickly followed by another scene of the antinarratable, which features Leopold Bloom’s morning trip to the toilet. Regarding this scene, Warhol notes, "when James Joyce places Leopold Bloom on a toilet in *Ulysses*, he is making perhaps his most radical break with Victorian limits of unnarratability by changing the boundaries of the unnarratable" (226). The effect of both of these scenes is heightened by their placement near the beginning of the novel.

Warhol’s argument is that when a particular narrative “experiments with widening the boundaries of the narratable,” and in the process makes “us conscious of unnarratability we hadn’t realized was previously there,” the result is neonarrative (227). Interestingly, in Warhol’s definition, the neonarrative “draws attention to a genre’s limits and, in many cases, actually pushes those limits out” (227). This means that, for Warhol, neonarrative cannot exist if readers are not aware of the unnarratable’s presence in the narrative. This definition makes sense, particularly in the case of high modernist texts that tended to expand narratability by focusing on the obscene, or that were not "proper": the antinarratable. This focus served the project of many modernist authors - to shock their readers out of complacency and paralysis induced by modern life. At the same time, however, the limits of the narratable were being extended in other directions as well. This less obvious current in modernist fiction attempted to extend the limits of
narratability to include what Warhol would call the subnarratable: that which is not worth telling, that which need not be told (as opposed to that which should not or cannot be told due to social prohibition or taboo).

In this chapter, I argue that some modernist authors designed neonarrative to be *unnoticeable*, to be submerged beneath an otherwise conventional surface that allows the text to be read as unthreatening to established norms. In fact, many narratives “passed” as conventional while they were actually radically rearranging the narrative priorities of modernist fiction. As with other kinds of passing narratives, texts engaging with submerged experimentation can be read as conventional, but for readers familiar with the conventions of the genre who attend to cues within the texts, the experimentation is legible. The focus on the subnarratable, particularly through the attention to the everyday, was one way that authors managed to expand the limits of the narratable without drawing overt attention to their expansions.

*Modernism and the Everyday*

Traditional accounts of modernism have long acknowledged the presence and even celebration of the obscene in modernist art, a traditionally sexualized and (often) masculine modernist project. However, my analysis here will show that, at the same time, both highbrow and middlebrow authors were creating alternatives to the obscene. Indeed, while scholarship has also long recognized the modernist interest in the everyday, as Rita Felski points out in “The Invention of Everyday Life,” the concept of the everyday remains a paradoxical concept, one that is at the same time self-evident and “the most puzzling of ideas” (15). In particular, Felski argues that the concept of the
everyday has an extensive written history. Mike Featherstone also traces the history of the concept of the everyday, as it is defined against the concept of the heroic, in his essay “The Heroic Life and Everyday Life.” Featherstone concludes that modernism displays a “fascination with the prosaic, the ordinary and the everyday […] which favoured an anti-heroic ethos and heroization of the mundane which sharply contrasts with the heroic life” (175). While highbrow modernists were clearly preoccupied with the everyday, and with the rhythms of daily life, I would argue, as Felski does, that typically when highbrow modernists treated the everyday, there was an urge to redeem the everyday “by rescuing it from its opacity, de-familiarising it and making us newly attentive to its mysteries” (26).³ The result, according to Felski, is that “the very act of magnifying and refracting taken-for-granted minutiae transcends the very dailiness it seeks to depict” (26). I argue that Woolf and Barnes both attempt, in different ways, to avoid this trap of overly defamiliarizing the everyday. In doing so, Woolf and Barnes treat the everyday and the domestic in markedly different ways than do other modernist authors.

Both Woolf and Barnes narrate events that in more conventional accounts would not have been told. Woolf presents Clarissa Dalloway engaged in domestic tasks, and Barnes focuses intensely on a middle-aged woman’s sense of embodiment. In both cases, mundane details of everyday life are central to plot and character development. Woolf and Barnes engage with a specific class of the mundane: the domestic, and a domestic which is marked by both class and gender as separate from the mundane, quotidian details other modernists sometimes focused on. In addition, Woolf’s treatment of the domestic is, I argue, positive and redemptive. Whereas other modernists tended to depict
the everyday as stifling and paralyzing, Woolf portrays the everyday, specifically women’s domestic tasks, as restorative and representative of artistic creation. Barnes’s focus on the domestic is more microscopic and encyclopedic than most highbrow or middlebrow modernists, and has a distinctly negative connotation, making her more in keeping with highbrow modernists than Woolf herself—at least in this respect.

Woolf and Barnes’s novels illustrate the impulse to expand narratability in the direction of the subnarratable and to focus on the everyday in unique ways. These two examples also show how the context of highbrow and middlebrow altered the experimental techniques each author chose to use; though both focus on the everyday, Woolf uses overt experimentation to incorporate the domestic into her novel, while Barnes engages in submerged experimentation because of the constraints and expectations of her social status and publishing context. In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf focuses her novel on the domestic activities and concerns of a middle-aged, upper-class woman. In Edna His Wife, Barnes uses submerged experimentation to incorporate a variety of subnarratable aspects, including the protagonist’s physical appearance, a decidedly non-ideal marriage which gives rise to nearly anti-narratable plot expectations, and an influenza pandemic. Both authors use specific techniques to cue readers to attend to particular details and to indicate that the mundane domesticity they represent is actually central to their respective projects. In this case, using submerged experimentation as an interpretive lens allows the analyst to see the different ends to which a highbrow and a middlebrow author used the same experimental techniques. Barnes’s use of the domestic results in a harsh critique of the role the domestic plays in
her protagonist’s life, whereas Woolf attempts to revalorize the domestic and elevate its status within an elite work of art.

_Buying the Flowers Herself_

Woolf’s 1925 novel, _Mrs. Dalloway_, opens with the famous line, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). This seemingly mundane, superfluous task (Clarissa does not even need to do this domestic task herself: she has servants who could do it) frames the rest of a novel that has been acclaimed as an extended meditation on interiority and existence. However, this mundane task is not merely a framing mechanism, and it is not the only scene of domestic labor in the novel. _Mrs. Dalloway_ revolves, both in the plot and the novel's controlling artistic metaphor, around domestic scenes, particularly the most trivial and lowly. Clarissa's party is, as numerous critics have pointed out, the central event and the central metaphor in the text. The party parallels artistic activity, the drawing together of seemingly disparate elements to create a harmonious whole. Clarissa, then, is the supreme artist in this world; she gives parties to which the Prime Minister and spinsters are equally welcome, and at which they enjoy themselves equally. Woolf, by making Clarissa a social architect of this sort, uses the language of high modernism to offer a radical revision of the high modernist project. A middle-aged society hostess stands as the central figure in the novel, offering her sewing and parties as remedies for the ailments of the modern world.

The opening sentence establishes the domestic as a focus of the novel; the grammar of the sentence “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (Woolf 3, my emphasis) also creates a tension between the knowledge of the narratee and that of
the reader. The narratee, addressed by the narrator, knows which flowers are being purchased, and what they are for. The authorial audience, addressed by the implied author through the narrator’s address to the narratee, does not. The actual audience may guess, but cannot do so with any certainty. In this case, the narrator functions override the disclosure functions, introducing tensions of unequal knowledge even as it introduces actual and authorial readers to the challenge of the technique, and cues readers to associate that technique with the domestic. This tension of unequal knowledge is continued in the following sentences, as the narrator, with Clarissa serving as focalizer, lists the things going on in her house: “For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges” (3). Once again, the narratee knows who Lucy is, understands what work Lucy she has in store for her, and why the doors will be taken off their hinges. These opening sentences thus establish the close connection in the novel between experimental artistic technique and domestic activities.

Unlike Barnes’s character Edna, discussed in the next section, Clarissa is portrayed as a very intelligent woman. However, Clarissa's concerns are quite definitely those of middle age and the upper middle classes -- in other words she has, as Peter Walsh scolded her for having, “the makings of the perfect hostess,” a phrase which for Peter (and for Clarissa when she was a young girl) means everything not intellectual, thoughtful, and philosophical (7). Though Peter reflects that his Daisy would pale in comparison to Clarissa, when other characters describe her, Clarissa is not particularly remarkable, at least externally. In the opening scene, Scrope Purvis thinks of her as charming, but notes that she's grown gray since her illness. Despite all of the characters’
thoughts about Clarissa that we hear in the opening scene, no one but Peter seems to consider her extraordinary. It is only his love that makes Clarissa Peter's ideal; to the other characters, she remains an ordinary, if interesting, middleclass woman. However, for the reader, Woolf uses the figural narration to transform Clarissa and her role and work as a middle-class and middle-aged woman into the epitome of creativity.

The revisioning of the creative process is one of the great innovations of Mrs. Dalloway, despite the paucity of commentary about this achievement in Woolf criticism. An exception is Jacob Littleton's article "Mrs. Dalloway: Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Woman," which examines Clarissa's role as artistic representative, recognizing both her conventionality and her revolutionary quality: "Clarissa's complex position comprises external conformity, ideological affinity, and substantive subversion" (47). This unique blend of conventional conformity and "substantive subversion" makes Clarissa an ideal figure for Woolf’s project of re-imagining the artist. Woolf's explicit aim with Mrs. Dalloway was to revolutionize the novel, and therefore her project was situated within the high modernist movement of formal experimentation. However, in addition to her explicit aim of radically changing the mode of narration and restricting the scope of action (both of which are in keeping with her highbrow context), Woolf also radically re-imagines the figure of the artist. Specifically, she imagines the artist as a middle-aged woman, and art as a well-executed party. This vision of artist and art was drastically divergent from the masculinist projects of other highbrow modernists, and even other female highbrows did not seek to revise the artist figure in this way. Here, Woolf breaks new ground, while blending experiments with theme and form. However,
because highbrow modernists often included details of the mundane in their works (in order to defamiliarize them or transcend them through technique), Woolf’s unique attempt to revalorize rather than transcend the domestic has gone almost entirely unnoticed. Indeed, as Woolf certainly knew, her use of stream-of-consciousness technique, with a form of free indirect discourse that moves freely from focalizer to focalizer, greatly increased the probability that the reader's focus would be on the narration rather than the narrated. For instance, as I will discuss in more detail below, the aesthetic principles set into play by the narration of the scene in which Clarissa mends her dress perfectly mirrors the act of sewing itself. Reviewers found this mundane act permissible in a highbrow work because Woolf’s writing complements the narrated act, emphasizing the inherent beauty and rhythm of sewing.

Contemporary reviews of Mrs. Dalloway, as well as subsequent literary criticism, focused on the elements of the text that were most closely aligned with highbrow modernism. Critics noted Woolf’s restricted temporal focus – like Joyce’s Ulysses, all the events of the novel take place within the span of a single day. Critics also drew attention to the new “psychological” style, which also placed her in the company of modernist experimenters. For conservative critics, Woolf sometimes stood as a marginally more acceptable example of this new school than many of her contemporaries. Frederic Taber Cooper, writing for The Bookman in 1927, claims that this new school is nothing to fear since, the law of survival of the fittest has a remorseless way of checking radicalism in literature. The novel especially, thanks to its resilience, has an amazing way of swinging back into the main straight tradition, the steady stream of contemporary life. It has that habit; it probably always
Cooper reassures his reader that almost all modern experimental techniques are not really experimental at all: “of experiments in punctuation it suffices to say that they are merely a gesture, a saucy protest, like a small boy sticking his tongue out, and almost equally bad form” (43). Likewise, Cooper thought free verse, or “the openly expressed disregard of the fundamental rules of technique […] might give more concern if it were to be taken seriously;” however, it was merely a whim or a passing fad (45). He saw stream of consciousness narration as another “transitory symptom” (46). He sees this as the novelist neglecting her job, which is to “winnow out the chaff, and serve us the real substance” (46). In place of this substance, Cooper complains that authors like Woolf (Mrs. *Dalloway* is his first example following this diatribe) simply “put in everything, the trivial and the momentous together, and let the reader take his choice, but the reader will become tired of taking his choice” (46). While most modern critics would agree that Cooper has missed the essential goal of *Mrs. Dalloway* and other stream of consciousness novels (although *Mrs. Dalloway*’s narration is actually more complicated than Cooper allows), the importance of this review is its repeated insistence on Woolf’s preoccupation with the trivial. Highbrow and middlebrow publications alike found it puzzling and sometimes infuriating that an author like Woolf, whom Cooper sees as “of all the experimentalists, the one most stimulating and most full of promise,” would waste her time and talent on so many useless details.
This trend is reflected in a similar review in *Life*, by Baird Leonard. Leonard's style is much lighter and more humorous than Cooper’s. In a manner characteristic of all of Leonard’s periodical writing, this review reveals her to be conversational, confiding, and firmly tongue-in-cheek. The author complains that, while Woolf manages to make Clarissa charming, she should not have "given her a pinched face and made her carry home the flowers she bought for her party" (1). However, despite the levity of her tone, she does hit on an essential characteristic that sets *Mrs. Dalloway* apart from other novels. She dismisses the label "fourth dimensional writing," explaining that it "really means putting down on paper details which most writers consider irrelevant to the plot, if they see them at all" (22). However, Leonard also highlights the fact that it is Woolf’s technique in *Mrs. Dalloway* that makes a pinched face and the act of carrying flowers (rather than having them sent) significant enough to warrant comment, even in jest. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf has made her focus those very aspects that are normally "considered irrelevant" and which, Leonard implies, authors do not notice at all (possibly because Leonard is here directing her criticism at male authors, the type who would not think to consider whether a heroine would carry flowers home herself).

The inclusion of "irrelevant" details in *Mrs. Dalloway* could be interpreted as a strategy for showcasing Woolf’s experimental prose. However, Woolf’s diaries indicate that Woolf did not conceptualize her novel in this way. Rather, the true experiment for Woolf was the combination of a new form of prose with a vision of life and the world that was, to use the oft-quoted phrase, “more real than realism.” In her diary, Woolf reflected:
The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don’t belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry – by which I mean saturated? (qtd. in Schwartz 35)

Thus, in Woolf’s vision for the novel, it is impossible to separate the form of the novel from the content. Rather, for Woolf, the content of each scene must be integral to its mode of representation, or else it is “false, unreal, merely conventional” (35). Woolf’s emphasis here is on “the moment” as opposed to “the narrative business of the realist”: the temporal sequence. For Woolf any subject matter is appropriate, as long as it is “whole” or “saturated.” It is this combination of treatment and treated, form and content, which makes Mrs. Dalloway a particularly interesting example of a highbrow modernist expanding the narratable. While critics were able to dismiss the content of Woolf’s novel as irrelevant, boring, exhaustive, or simply misjudged, the novel still earned its place in the highbrow canon because of its innovative form. Woolf, however, saw the innovative form and the domestic content as inextricably connected.

Thus, although Woolf’s aim was to write novels that included scenes of domestic life as central and essential to their overall effect, Woolf’s contemporaries and peers – those to whom Clarissa’s concerns would have seemed “class-obsessed fripperies” if written in a realist prose style -- overlooked or even welcomed the mundane as belonging solidly to the tradition of modernist art because it was clothed in Woolf’s innovative prose (Humble 11). Woolf’s approach allowed contemporaries to view the form as beautiful despite the content, while Woolf viewed her own formal and thematic
objectives as inextricably linked. *Mrs. Dalloway* might have come across to some readers as a highbrow text with a similar disdain for the “getting on from lunch to dinner.” However, Woolf’s text and diaries reveal that she fundamentally disagreed with many of her peers on what exactly constituted “getting on” and what was truly of the moment. Unlike her male contemporaries, Woolf saw domestic activities as “poetry.” Many modernist highbrows focused on the mundane and quotidian, but Woolf’s particular focus on the domestic realm, and a classed and gendered domestic realm at that, was not viewed as belonging to the same school. Writing in *The Nation*, Joseph Wood Krutch calls Woolf’s method “the newest and most radical,” but the subject matter, which he sees as the old-fashioned charm of “persons who are leading orderly lives,” he deems “the most conservative thing in the world” (632). This reaction to the thematic content was typical; critics read Clarissa as charming, if insignificant, but either ignored or did not recognize that Woolf was using Clarissa and her interests to highlight a realm of experience considered subnarratable even by those invested in dwelling on the mundane and quotidian. The disconnect comes from the fact that, as Fiske argues, critics were accustomed to reading the work of authors who sought to transcend their subject matter, rather than show its inherent redemptive qualities.

While critics have noted the centrality of Clarissa's party in the novel, the image of Clarissa, with her scissors and silks, mending her dress, as Peter Walsh sees her when he visits unexpectedly, is a model for how domestic activity throughout the novel should be read. This intensely domestic activity is what is most associated with Clarissa in the beginning of the novel, and what continually returns to Peter Walsh's mind as he wanders
around London thinking about her. In this scene, domestic activity is framed as restorative, healing, and centering on a world that offers none of these rewards to Clarissa. The scene also frames many of Clarissa’s most explicit reflections on the purpose of her parties and her life. Yet when critics mention this scene, they tend to describe it in negative terms. Justyna Kostkowska, in her article, "'Scissors and Silks,' 'Flowers and Trees,' and 'Geraniums Ruined by the War:' Virginia Woolf's Ecological Critique of Science in Mrs. Dalloway," argues that the scene with Clarissa and her mending is one of the novel's many examples of how Clarissa has become invisible and oppressed in her domestic life. However, this view adopts Peter's view of Clarissa - that she has grown cold, "too cold, he thought, sewing, with her scissors" (43). This assessment is connected to Peter's view of the Dalloways's marriage, which Peter views with a mix of envy, contempt, and pity; Peter feels that Richard's mind and opinions have "grown on her, as [they] tend to do. With twice his wits, she had to see things through his eyes - one of the tragedies of married life" (76-7). Clarissa, instead of feeling suffocated by Richard, feels relieved by the distance between them, in contrast to what life would have been like with Peter: "So she would still find herself arguing in St. James's Park, still making out that she had been right - and she had too - not to marry him. For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him" (7-8).

While Peter sees Clarissa's ability to sew during their emotional interview as coldness, Clarissa, on the other hand, enjoys this activity, and it brings her a sense of self
and stability during her surprising and somewhat disturbing conversation with Peter. Indeed, this act returns Clarissa to a truer self after she is transformed into "Mrs. Dalloway," the mistress of her house, upon leaving her tower room. In the privacy of her room, the title character is referred to as Clarissa, but when she descends into the house, "assembling that diamond shape, that single person," she transforms herself back into Mrs. Dalloway. It is "Mrs. Dalloway" who thanks Lucy for her offer of help with the mending, but it is Clarissa who begins to reflect as she sews. This act of sewing provides something that even the "room of her own" does not--a sense of peace and unity:

Quiet descended on her; calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. (39-40)

Just before this passage the narration is focalized through Clarissa as she enters the drawing room and begins to sew, and just after this passage there is the direct discourse of Clarissa’s response to Peter’s ringing the doorbell. This passage stands out as a moment of externally focalized narration, the syntax of which echoes the rhythm of the needle going in and out of the dress. This echo and the external narrator’s link to Woolf makes the link between Clarissa’s domestic activity and Woolf’s artistic activity more clearly visible. In this scene, it is not Clarissa who views her sewing as artistic, it is the narrator, and by extension, Woolf, who valorizes the act of sewing.
This is far from the stifling, paralyzing domesticity that Kostkowska sees in the scene. A contemporary critic noted the beauty of this scene and that "while Mrs. Woolf is describing the falling of the waves, we never forget Clarissa sewing. The greater rhythm as it were accompanies the less, and it brings into the room where Clarissa is sitting its serenity and spaciousness. There is something in the ritual of sewing, a memory of another rhythm buried deep within it, which an image such as this, so unexpected, so remote, reveals to us" (722). More generally, as many critics have noted, Woolf often uses images of the sea to represent an ideal unity, a connecting force that finds its analog in a collective consciousness or intermentality, and is often accomplished through art. Thus, this domestic act of mending a garment functions much as Clarissa's party does - as a conscious act of artistic creation, akin to a painter's sketches or an author's free-writing. Clarissa does feel unsatisfied and somewhat stifled in her everyday life, but it is not domestic activity that oppresses her; what depresses and oppresses her is “this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (11). As Mrs. Richard Dalloway, wife of a public figure: “often now this body she wore […], this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown” (10-11). Interestingly, when Clarissa contemplates this feeling, she expresses it (internally) as a result of “there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street” (11).

In this passage, we see that what bothers Clarissa is not exactly her domestic situation. Rather, it is the sense of herself as somehow complete that is unsettling to
Clarissa. This feeling of self as definitive and finite is something she resists throughout the novel:

That was her self - pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps; [...] never showing a sign of all the other sides of her - faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions. (37)

Clarissa sees herself as a complex woman, composed of parts that cannot all be reconciled under the title of "Mrs. Dalloway"; however, she manages, through an exercise of self-control, to assemble herself into that woman. It is this demand upon her that she finds difficult - in contrast, the act of descending to her drawing room, gathering her silks and scissors, and privately sitting to mend her dress, is an activity that allows her to release that self that is "pointed; dart-like; definite" (37). In this way, sewing offers a release from the constraints of society, and a replacement for prayer, which is part of a religion Clarissa cannot embrace.

From Peter’s memories, we learn that Clarissa has always sought to imagine herself as diffuse, always extending, always distributed:

But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not “here, here, here”; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. [...] She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities had she with people she had never spoken to [...] It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her skepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death … perhaps –perhaps. (153)
It seems to be Clarissa's ability to control her emotions (unlike Peter himself, who weeps in front of her, to his dismay), which most disturbs Peter, and he locates this in her ability to sew during what is, for him, a very difficult meeting. Peter has interrupted her with an unannounced visit, and as they reminisce Clarissa becomes emotional, looking back "holding her life in her arms which, [...] grew larger and larger in her arms, until it became a whole life, a complete life, which she put down by them [i.e., her parents] and said, 'This is what I have made of it! This!' And what had she made of it? What, indeed? Sitting there sewing this morning with Peter" (43). This reflection on how her life has culminated in this scene of domesticity makes Clarissa tearful, but she "quite simply wipe[s] her eyes" and continues. Peter, on the other hand, becomes agitated, repeating to himself thoughts that Clarissa herself entertained while alone in her room: "Stop! Stop! he wanted to cry. For he was not old; his life was not over; not by any means. He was only just past fifty" (43). Clarissa manages to reflect on the state of her life with only a sense of regret, while Peter becomes intensely emotional and seeks to deny the facts; while Clarissa is very precise about her age ("She was not old yet. She had just broken into her fifty-second year. Months and months of it were still untouched. June, July, August!") (36), Peter is more vague. Despite the fact that he is six months older than she is, he seeks to reduce his age in years by not declaring them as precisely as Clarissa does. Thus, in addition to emotional self-control, we also see an inner honesty in Clarissa that seems lacking or less pronounced in Peter. It makes sense in the narrative dynamics of this scene that Peter sees Clarissa's ability to return to her sewing in the midst of these turbulent emotions as a sign of coldness. The reader, on the other hand,
knows that she is seeking to return to that sense of quiet that she first attained when she began to mend her dress.

Later, Clarissa is forced to lie down after her luncheon. This is another moment when one could read Clarissa as being literally immobilized by her marriage and her home - Richard returns from his own luncheon and promptly forces her to lie down on the couch "because a doctor had ordered it once"; however, she uses the time to reflect on why she bothers to give her parties, why she puts the effort into entertaining people (120). She notes that both Peter and Richard "thought, or Peter at any rate thought, that she enjoyed imposing herself; liked to have famous people about her; great names; was simply a snob in short. [...] Richard merely thought it foolish of her to like excitement when she knew it was bad for her heart. It was childish, he thought" (121). While wondering how she would defend herself from these claims if they were asked aloud (for they are always merely implied), she settles on "they're an offering; which sounded horribly vague" (121). Clarissa attempts to further clarify this thought:

But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgements, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life? Oh, it was very queer. [...] She felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow it was her gift. Nothing else had she of the slightest importance; could not think, write, even play the piano. (122)

Here Clarissa explicitly frames her parties as an artistic activity, and therefore worthwhile and as defensible, if not more so, than Peter's love. What would be considered trivial, domestic concerns--who should one invite to a party, how the seating should be arranged
at dinner, etc.-- become elements of an artist's craft. Clarissa, at this intensely domestic moment (she lies on the couch, still, in her drawing room - the center of her home), is able to understand her own motivations and desires and envisions them both as explicitly tied to artistic creation, and as an offering for the sake of making an offering. As Peter notes in his own reflections, after she lost her sister in an accident, Clarissa "thought there were no Gods; no one was to blame; and so she evolved this atheist's religion of doing good for the sake of goodness" (78). Clarissa’s domestic activities take the place of the religious activities she cannot believe in. Ultimately, Clarissa’s domestic artistry is not only a defensible form of creativity; it is a substitute for the failed institutions that high modernism often sought to replace.

While some readers and critics, like Peter, see Clarissa as “simply a snob” and her party as a parody of the serious art that Woolf creates in her novel, I find this reading ultimately unpersuasive largely because of the decidedly non-mundane character of Septimus Smith. Septimus, of course, is the representative of the Great War’s destruction and disruption, and also of the failures of society. Septimus feels threatened, not comforted, by the institutions that should care for him. Throughout the entire novel, Septimus is tortured by visions of the dead and elusive moments of revelation. The only moment in the text when he returns to stability and is able to relate to his wife, Rezia, is in a moment of utter domesticity when he helps Rezia trim a hat for one of her clients. In this moment, in their small flat, surrounded by domestic detritus, Septimus is happy, and feels well. It is only the prospect of losing that domestic stability and safety (the approach of Dr. Holmes) that spurs him to jump from the window and kill himself.
Septimus’s final scene reinforces the importance and redeeming potential of the domestic, when individuals are permitted access to it. The news of Septimus’s death is delivered at Clarissa’s party, brings the two worlds together, and rather than ruining Clarissa’s vision, seems to affirm it. Clarissa does initially lament that the Bradshaws “talked of it at her party!” (184). However, her initial dismay is overshadowed by her empathy for Septimus, a man she has never met, and only knows of through Lady Bradshaw. She perceives Sir William Bradshaw as Septimus does: “a great doctor yet to her obscurely evil […] capable of some indescribable outrage” (184). Most importantly, Clarissa wonders if “this young man who had killed himself – had he plunged holding his treasure?” (184). And she intuits that “one wouldn’t like Sir William to see one unhappy. No; not that man” (182). Clarissa imagines that Septimus might have been a poet or a thinker and if he were, she understands why he would have had to kill himself: “if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?” (185). Clarissa, despite her ignorance of the details of Septimus’s suicide, confirms the reader’s knowledge that Septimus kills himself in order to avoid giving himself over to men like Holmes and Bradshaw.

“Somehow it was her disaster – her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress” (185). This moment of self-awareness at the end of the novel, in which Clarissa empathizes with Septimus and recognizes and acknowledges her own failings, also reinforces the importance of her domestic activities throughout the
Though she also despairs of her own impotence, the passage echoes her earlier claim that she has a continuous sense of other people’s existence ("what a waste" and "what a pity") and Peter, when he saw Rezia and Septimus earlier in the day in the Park, thought, if Clarissa were here, she would speak to them, try to help. The novel indicates that Clarissa’s actions, though they are limited in scope, have the same redemptive and creative potential as art.

Through these scenes, Woolf places domestic activity at the center of the novel’s revisioning of artistic creation. Thus, the subnarratable becomes central not only to plot (the movement of the novel depends upon Clarissa’s domestic movements: retiring at midday, sewing in the drawing room, resting in the afternoon), but to the technique of Woolf’s novel. I argue that Woolf’s use of the subnarratable is integral to the design of the novel; it stands not merely as an occasion to showcase superb writing (in other words, to show how amazing stream-of-consciousness technique is by using it to portray the most dull of events), but rather as an essential part of the novel’s design. The domestic activities Woolf portrays Clarissa engaging in are like the narration and the novel; they accomplish the same (in many ways typically modernist) goals. Thus, a reader cued by the opening to read for the domestic would recognize the emphasis on the domestic and the subnarratable as innovative in its own right.

*Edna the Wife*

The original dust jacket of Margaret Ayer Barnes’s *Edna His Wife* proclaimed that the novel was another “of those completely satisfying stories of American family life in which Mrs. Barnes excels.” When it was published in 1935, Margaret Ayer Barnes’s
Edna His Wife was greeted as merely another bestseller by a novelist known for writing “sufficient” but not brilliant prose. However, despite its reception by contemporary critics and reviewers, Edna His Wife is far from the light, frothy novel about “American family life” the dust jacket advertised. Barnes engages with the subnarratable through the way she represents her protagonist and focalizer, in the expectations that she establishes for that protagonist, and via the tension she creates between the issues her protagonist deals with and the prose used to describe to those issues. Barnes’s unique use of the subnarratable creates a novelistic indictment of the very “American family life” her reviewers thought she was cataloguing objectively.

Barnes’s use of submerged experimentation was motivated by a combination of social and gender factors. As a female middlebrow author, any narrative experimentation she used was unlikely to be taken seriously by reviewers. In addition, Barnes’s position as a member of the privileged class of Chicago society and a traditional wife and mother made her an unlikely candidate for acceptance into the “new school” of experimental novelists. Instead, Barnes, who according to her biographer was uncertain about her talent from the beginning, chose to use submerged experimentation to pursue aims similar to those of high modernists.

In the Prelude to Edna His Wife, Barnes emphasizes Edna’s helplessness and her inability to fit into the society into which she has been placed. Barnes achieves these emphases through a style that the authorial audience probably would have found jarring or at least unusual, as well as details that establish expectations that run counter to the expectations of the genre, which call for a happy, resolved ending. This combination of
themes and techniques forms the foundation for Barnes’s project in the novel. In a novel that was almost universally judged to be unremarkable, Barnes interrogates the role of women in elite society, the assumptions about form in the middlebrow, and the conventions of middlebrow plot.

*Edna His Wife* opens with a Prelude that describes a late middle-aged Edna arriving on Broadway at midmorning, dressing in a “symphony of black” (suggesting she might be in mourning), and attending a romantic film. In Chapter One, immediately following the Prelude, we move backwards in time to meet Edna as a young girl in Blue Island, Illinois, in the late 1890s. The story then follows Edna chronologically through her courtship with and marriage to Paul Jones, a driven young lawyer. The novel chronicles the Jones’s move from humble flat in Chicago, to the comfortable Chicago suburbs, to affluent Lakeshore Drive. At the beginning of the war, the Joneses move to Washington D.C. and then to New York City following the war. From the beginning of her marriage to Paul, Edna’s life is an inexorable climb up the social and financial ladder, with Barnes telling the parallel story of her discomfort with and inability to fit into the society beyond that of Lakewood Terrace in the Chicago suburbs. The novel ends chronologically where the Prelude begins – Edna has returned from attending her sister’s funeral in Chicago and, still dressed in her mourning clothes, she decides to go to the movies.

One of the only extended critical responses to Margaret Ayer Barnes’s work is Nancy S. Rabinowitz's and Peter J. Rabinowitz's article, “Legends of Toothpaste and Love: Margaret Ayer Barnes and the Poetics of Stupidity.” This article argues
convincingly that *Edna His Wife* actually contains a vehement feminist attack on capitalism and its myths. Before beginning this argument, the authors review contemporary criticism of Barnes’s work, concluding that Lloyd C. Taylor Jr.’s biography “embodies precisely the same condescension that has been responsible for [Barnes’s] neglect since the forties” (132). Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz remind readers that almost all of the contemporary reviewers condemned Barnes on the basis of “gentility” and “domesticity,” noting that “by now, however, we should have learned to be leery of attacks based on [these terms], they are often simply a code for the complaint that an author happens to be a woman writing about women” (133). The authors go on to illustrate how Barnes uses Edna’s dullness to craft a scathing indictment of the fundamental myth of modern industrialism: that social advancement is both achievable and desirable. According to Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz, she does this “not by suggesting, as did so many radical novelists of the time, that such success is impossible, but rather by showing that it has a tremendous price tag and, most important, that the structure of society forces women to pay disproportionately” (134).

While I agree with the Rabinowitzes that Barnes's management of plot and character demonstrates considerable skill, I would extend their argument by showing that Barnes is also in perfect control of her prose, and that she uses submerged experimentation at the level of style to deepen her feminist critique of American society. Barnes combines a manipulation of prose with an insistent focus on the subnarratable to craft a criticism of women’s place in the modern world. The degree of experimentation present in Barnes’s fiction is certainly covert – it passed beneath the notice of
contemporary reviewers, subsequent literary critics, and even biographers. However, as with other instances of submerged experimentation, this does not mean that Barnes's play with technique and theme went completely unnoticed. Just as Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz’s article relies on the assumption that some readers implicitly understood Barnes’s novel as a critique of the myths surrounding and supporting modern industrialism, I would argue that many readers were aware of the experimental and subversive nature of Barnes’s prose, particularly because Barnes cues readers in the opening section to read the novel as experimental.

Despite reviewers’ repeated assertions of its convertionality, within the realm of the family romance or the family drama, *Edna His Wife* stands out with both a highly unconventional opening section and a persistent focus on aspects of the mundane that were considered subnarratable within the conventions of the popular novel. Despite the straightforward statement of the novel’s subject and purpose on the dust jacket, and her biographer’s cursory dismissal of any claims her work may have made to literary merit and “poetic quality,” the world in which the novel opens is far from being the world of domesticity and family life Barnes was praised for describing so well. Instead, the novel opens in an American version of Eliot’s Waste Land, described in a prose style that is not matched in the rest of the novel. The extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator begins the novel in a detached manner that sets the opening apart from the rest of the novel and from other novels that the authorial audience would initially seek to compare it to:

> Clear, pale October sunlight was shining down on the slanting intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, illuminating with the uncompromising clarity of midmorning the restless ugliness of the crowded streets [...] Overhead, gaunt, structural skeletons, which night would resolve into
glowing legends of toothpaste and love and liquor and food and
entertainment, invaded even the tranquility of the sky. (3)

The prose here stands out as artful and figurative in a text that is, for the most part written in literal-minded prose. There is a proliferation of words ending in “ing”—shining, slanting, illuminating, uncompromising, midmorning, glowing—suggesting process rather than fixity. The city itself is personified in the “restless ugliness” of the streets, and the billboards are given a sort of life (or afterlife) in their “gaunt, structural skeletons.”

Barnes creates a tension between the clarity and beauty of the October morning and the ugliness and sordidness of the city scene she describes.

Like Eliot’s crowd flowing over London Bridge, Barnes describes how “diagonal currents of traffic shot ceaselessly through Times Square, checking the pedestrians who trickled over the curbstones with the swift menace of the taxis or the ponderous threat of the trucks” (4). After describing the living death of New York’s streets, Barnes goes on, as Eliot does in The Waste Land, to describe a woman. Eliot’s woman prepares to play a game of chess, sitting in her “burnished throne”; Barnes’s woman is situated in a limousine, covered with a lap-robe. Like the woman in “A Game of Chess,” this woman, who we later learn is Edna, is surrounded by the signs of material femininity—Edna appears as though she “must have been melted in some couturier’s crucible and poured into” her ensemble, and she is marked by the “bloom of Rachel powder” and “a face that had been worked over for years by experienced operators in well-equipped beauty salons” (5). Finally, while Eliot’s woman takes refuge from her domestic sterility in the phonograph (“O O O O that Shakespearean Rag…”), Edna seeks “the anodyne – […] the sweet drug of vicarious romance” in popular movies (8).
This narrative voice is markedly different from that of the rest of the novel. Throughout the novel, the third person narrative voice recounts events that are focalized primarily through Edna, though occasionally it switches briefly to other characters. The marked shift between the style and voice of the Prelude and that of the rest of the novel creates instability in the text, cuing the authorial audience to look for additional moments of experimental prose. Thus, in addition to engaging with middlebrow patterns and expectations, Barnes also engages with, and cues a particular group of readers to consider, issues of form and content normally associated with the highbrow.

The opening scene of the novel cues readers to consider style and form in unexpected ways (at least unexpected for the middlebrow), and it also introduces the reader to the primary subject matter of the novel. While the remainder of the novel deploys more traditional prose, the prelude focuses the reader’s attention on the central concerns of the novel. Edna’s body is described in minute detail, and her body will continue to be the focus of much of the novel’s conflict. The modernist focus on the body forces the reader to confront the body in unfamiliar ways – Edna begins like other fictional heroines, but her body refuses all attempts at control, and she herself, while aware of society’s demands upon her body, consistently resists or undermines her own conformity to those demands. Thus, the body that is in front of us throughout the novel is, by turns, short, stout, fat, pudgy, round, double-chinned, and "soft" – to name only a few of the descriptors Barnes uses. Edna reads articles about “reducing” but is unable to fully commit to any program except that which ultimately brings her closest to bodily excess: the reducing dance class with Bobo (the class is taught by a gigolo, who calls himself a
prince and convinces Edna that he is passionately in love with her; Edna breaks off their relationship and stops attending the class when she becomes frightened that she will be unfaithful to her husband). In the opening scene quoted above, Edna’s body appears as though it has been melted down and poured into her outfit from a crucible, which implies a passivity and receptivity, but in reality her body repeatedly resists the ministrations her class gives her access to.

If *Mrs. Dalloway* opens with a declarative sentence indicative of so many aspects of the text that are to follow, then *Edna His Wife* opens with an equally indicative first line. Unlike Woolf, who makes Clarissa Dalloway the acting subject of the first sentence of her novel -- with Clarissa, indeed, choosing to do something that would normally be done by hired help – Barnes calls attention in her opening to Edna’s lack of agency. It is not just that Barnes excludes Edna from the novel’s opening description but also that Barnes soon shows her to be, in fulfillment of her mother’s worries, not “acting, but…acted upon” (15). When Edna is introduced, it is as an anomaly in the waste land of Broadway in the morning: overdressed, overweight, and slightly ridiculous in her indecision and uncertainty. In *Edna His Wife*, Barnes shows us a woman who has done everything society has asked of her, and everything she was taught to do, and has still somehow failed, or been failed. Edna is perfectly and expensively dressed, and has the advantages of wealth and time, and yet, before we know almost anything about her, this opening Prelude prepares the reader to pity, not admire, her. Edna Losser Jones does not have the fascinating inner life of Clarissa Dalloway, which might rescue her from being essentially unnarratable. Rather, Barnes’s radical decision in this novel was to choose as
her subject a woman who is irredeemably subnarratable; hers is a life which “need not be
told,” and yet Barnes sets out to tell it, and to raise it to the level of tragedy. Woolf
chooses to hold Clarissa up as analogous to an artist, while Barnes shows Edna as
incapable of becoming anything like an artist, and then shows how she is entrapped by
domesticity, not freed by it.

The Prelude establishes a haunting contrast between the jostling pedestrians and
meager loiterers - "slight, shabby girls flaunting a poor bravado of paint and lipstick and
powder - whose anxious faces stood out in striking contrast with the vapid ovals and
insipid profiles of the faces on the [movie] posters” (3) and the heroine of the novel's
title. Edna, who is first introduced without being named, is described as the single
occupant of a Pierce-Arrow limousine:

that occupant was a round little woman in the middle fifties, very carefully
dressed in very obviously expensive clothes, so tight, so smooth, so plain,
so serenely fitted over her plump contours, that they gave rather the
impression that she must have been melted in some couturier’s crucible
and poured into them. (4)

The narrator goes on to describe Edna’s body and appearance but assigns no agency to
Edna herself. Unlike even the "slight, shabby girls" on Broadway who demonstrate
considerable agency in "flaunting” their "poor bravado," Edna is acted upon by her
ensemble, rather than acting through her clothing or appearance. The woman in this
opening description is entirely passive, entirely acted upon: "her stubby feet were
encased in black suede oxfords, her plump, short hands were moulded in black suede
gloves. Black chiffon stockings, with distended clocks, stretching tightly over her
insteps, struck a faintly lugubrious note and suggested that the round little woman might
be in mourning" (4-5, my emphases). The narrator describes a woman whose body has almost entirely submitted to "experienced operators in well-equipped beauty parlors. Softened by creams, tightened by astringents, faintly tinged by rouge and dusted with the creamy bloom of Rachel powder, it would have presented an appearance as devoid of expression as the faces on the motion-picture 'stills,' except for the small, pursed mouth that hinted of years of inarticulate suppressions, and the round blue eyes that held, at fifty-five, a vague look of almost girlish bewilderment" (5). Edna’s body is almost passive, almost controlled, but also constantly resisting the operators she pays to control it.

In the above passages, Barnes establishes Edna’s passivity by using verbs in the passive voice and suggesting that her garments, rather than Edna herself, perform socially significant actions. Grammatically, every aspect of the passage portrays Edna as acted upon, rather than acting. We see Edna's body as passive, and repressed by the skill of couturiers and beauty parlor "operators." However, although the grammar of the passage indicates passivity, there is a submerged tension established between this grammatical passivity and the hints of activity and resistance in Edna’s body. Her mouth, small and pursed (and, one would infer, thus showing wrinkles despite the operators' best efforts), along with her eyes are the only parts of her body that are described as active. These body-parts thus seem to resist the process of remolding Edna has been subject to--a process aimed at turning her into one of those faces on the movie posters "bred for show purposes, all homely human traits eliminated by some prodigious process of eugenic showmanship" (4). However, even in the details of this description where Edna's body
seems most constrained, we can see it, quite literally, straining at its bonds; her stubby
feet, although encased in black oxfords, manage to distend the clocks of her stockings.
On her face, Edna displays almost imperceptible wrinkles around her eyes and a double-
chin line. Despite all the workings of those experienced operators, Edna shows signs of
her age, and her body displays a rebellious quality, although, like everything about Edna,
it is characterized by "inarticulate suppressions" (5). These inarticulate suppressions are
also signs of her unhappiness and her inability to express that unhappiness directly – so
they manifest their effects in her small, pursed mouth and the vague bewilderment of her
eyes.

Indeed, this section repeatedly emphasizes not only the passive yet subtly
rebellious quality of Edna's body, but also the characteristic that makes it rebellious: its
size. Edna is described in just this short passage as: stubby, plump, short, round, fat, and
soft. When she first moves, the narrator describes Edna as "lurch[ing] awkwardly
forward from the soft upholstery" (5). Throughout the novel, Edna continually tries to
mould herself into the wife that Paul wants her to be; but from the very beginning of their
courtship in Blue Island,

she was always afraid that he was going to ‘see through her.’ For the Edna
Paul Jones admired was not the Edna familiar from babyhood to her father
and mother and Pearl. This was as near as she ever came to the definite
realization that her whole attitude toward him was an elaborate, if
unconscious, deception; a complicated pretense of interests utterly foreign
to her nature, assumed in a passionate desire to please. (58)

She quickly realizes that she cannot become what he wants intellectually, but she
believes, due to her upbringing, that she will more than compensate for her intellectual
failings by being the consummate wife and mother. However well Edna might fulfill
those roles, the first glimpse of Edna we get after her elopement is preoccupied with her physical state: “She was a slightly different Edna. Plumper and paler. The trim virginal curves of her girlish figure were gone. Her waistline had thickened and her full bosom strained at the tightly stretched silk of her bodice” (95). Edna is alone in this scene, which is externally focalized, establishing the focus on Edna’s body as belonging to the narrator, rather than a character.

The next several pages of text focus on the four rooms of Edna and Paul’s Chicago flat, complete with details about their domestic economy (where the small decorating budget was spent, and why), and also about Edna’s utter satisfaction with almost every aspect of her home. In chapter 3, when Paul has moved the family to the suburbs of Oakwood Terrace, it is again Edna’s physical appearance that first greets the reader: “She was wearing a white bibbed apron over a silk afternoon dress. It fell straight from her plump shoulders and the rising swell of her breasts over her still comely, but slightly tubular form” (148). This emphasis on Edna’s physicality is unusual in its detail and persistence throughout the text. Edna His Wife focuses more graphically and in a more extended way on Edna’s body than was normal for the genre. We hear detailed accounts of her weight loss plans (mostly gleaned from the pages of Ladies Home Journal) and their subsequent failure, making central the tensions among the expectations placed on Edna’s body, her own attempts to control it and force it to conform to those expectations, and the silently resisting reality of her body. This tension reflects the dynamic of submerged experimentation -- in this instance Edna’s body becomes the site of submerged resistance and subversion of the dominant norms. Even in Barnes’s own
fiction, the norm for heroines was still the willowy ideal of the magazine flapper. Although by this time the notion of the flapper was a bit outdated, a boyish slimness remained an ideal for women. This idea is set up by Paul himself at the beginning of the novel, when he describes his ideal woman to Edna: “Some mistress of millions. A tall, dark goddess with a turn for wit, an enigmatic smile and an infinite capacity for adoring a brilliant husband” (66). Thus, Edna’s obsession with forcing her body to conform, while it consistently resists the ideal image established for her by magazines, films, and even her husband, illustrates her ambivalence toward all of those forces, perhaps her husband most of all.

In parallel with its unusual emphasis on Edna’s physicality, the novel is structurally designed to resist and challenge the expectations of the genre. Edna His Wife is structured to encourage readers to hope for and expect an ending that is antithetical to the genre’s traditional plot expectations. In addition, the plot is organized around the subnarratable rather than traditionally momentous plot points, emphasizing Barnes’s focus on the subnarratable and her goal of establishing a subtext of submerged experimentation. As is often the case with submerged experimentation, the experimental quality of Edna His Wife’s plot is only evident to those familiar with the standards and expectations of the genre, and those who have responded to the cues in the Prelude to read for submerged experimentation.

It is somewhat surprising that contemporary reviewers, who might be most likely to read Barnes’s work in the context of her other novels, mostly ignored or considered unimportant the ties among her novels. Most importantly, Edna His Wife features
characters from one of Barnes’s earlier novels. Members of Barnes’s authorial audience would have come to *Edna His Wife* having read *Within This Present* and at least some of Barnes’s other novels. They would therefore have a set of expectations about plot and would have been able to make judgments about the characters that Edna herself is incapable of making, and which a reader unfamiliar with Barnes’s earlier work would not be equipped to make. In particular, because Barnes’s previous novels included similar tales of modern or near-modern marriages that suffer setbacks and then recover, the reader would have had very specific expectations for the outcome of the heroine and her Gibson groom. Barnes capitalized on the expectations of her assumed audience, creating a form of submerged experimentation that would easily go unnoticed by readers unfamiliar with, or unconcerned with, the conventions of middlebrow novels such as her own. By making the subnarratable aspects of Edna’s life the central focus of her novel, and by transforming her readers’ expectations so that they anticipated and even hoped for an ending that would be considered tragic in almost any other novel in the genre, Barnes creates a text that simultaneously conforms to and radically undermines the middlebrow novel. In other words, *Edna His Wife* managed to “pass” as a middlebrow novel, while questioning the underlying assumptions of and about the genre.

*Edna His Wife* was written after Barnes had already proven her bestseller status with *Years of Grace* and had already been awarded the Pulitzer Prize. It was also not the first novel Barnes wrote that dealt with Chicago society – she was known as a faithful chronicler of Chicago’s fashionable elite. In *Within This Present*, published in 1934, Barnes follows the lives and fortunes of the Sewall family of Chicago, along with the
Truesdales and McLeods (who are all connected through marriage and business), through the Great War and the stock market crash that devastates the families’ business and fortunes. In this novel, the Sewalls and Truesdales are portrayed as part of a generation that has lost its way and forgotten its origins. The novel opens with Granny Sewall delivering a harsh indictment of her children and grandchildren at her own seventieth birthday party. She reminds them of their humble origins, and their fathers’ and grandfathers’ roles as pioneers in the prairie wilds that would become Chicago. Thus, the idyllic and eminently fashionable tableau of the Sewalls and Truesdales arranged in the drawing room after dinner is undermined by the presence of “the frail little matriarch in rose-point and diamonds, who had rebuked the clan. [...] well-dressed, well-fed, amusing enough, always kind, usually courteous – ‘nice people.’” Here sixteen-year-old Sally’s musings on her family echo her grandmother’s phrase. Granny Sewall, whose name Sally bears, uses the phrase “nice people” to indicate how inert and inconsequential she believes her family to have become. Of course, because of her upbringing, Sally senses her grandmother’s meaning, but is unable to identify what is wrong with this clan, until she realizes that “there was no place – there never would be – in this serene, safe room for the hardy pioneer virtues that had made it possible” (35).

Among the effete offspring of Granny Sewall is Cora Sewall Truesdale, who appears in *Edna His Wife* at one of the first fashionable parties Edna is forced to attend due to her husband’s success. Edna is awed by Cora, and feels completely inadequate when faced with her social idol. A reader coming to *Edna His Wife* having read *Within This Present* would thus have a drastically different view than Edna of the fashionable
party at which Edna first meets Cora, and first feels her social failure. An experienced reader would know of the Truesdale’s inevitable fall from grace with the stock market crash, and the absurdity that Cora Truesdale’s own sister-in-law and brother perceive in her carriage and elaborate social gatherings. While Edna views Cora Sewall Truesdale as the epitome of everything she dreamed of as a young girl (Cora was her ideal “Gibson Bride”\textsuperscript{14}), the reader familiar with Barnes’s previous work sees an arrogant woman, viewed as slightly ridiculous by her own family, who is heading for a fall from grace (in \textit{Within This Present}, the Sewalls, Truesdales, and Macleods lose their entire family fortune in the stock market panic, whereas Edna’s husband plays the market conservatively and remains wealthy after the crash). Thus, for the experienced reader, Barnes establishes a tension between how Edna views the party and its guests and their actual status within the storyworld. The authorial audience sympathizes with Edna’s perceptions, but also recognizes how limited they are, further showing how ill-equipped Edna is to fulfill the role Paul has cast her in. In this scene in particular, Paul has exhorted Edna to “notice everything,” in order to be better able to emulate the type of society Paul wishes to join. The disconnect between the reader’s understanding of the situation and Edna’s highlights Edna’s fundamental inability to adapt and live comfortably in any society higher than that of Oakwood Terrace. The savvy reader knows that while Cora appears to be the ideal woman of fashion, she is also a figure of ridicule to those above her on the social ladder. The reader can also draw a connection between Edna and Granny Baines Sewall, who remembers days of more modest living,
and raised children who know and understand nothing of the reality their parents lived through.

In addition to having insight into characters that Edna herself does not have access to, readers familiar with *Within this Present* would have had an understanding of the “proper” plot structure of this type of novel. In most of Barnes’s fiction, including *Within this Present* and *Westward Passage*, lead female characters struggle to find a fulfilling match, often divorcing or separating, but ultimately find happiness with the “right” man (almost always the man the female protagonist was married to or involved with at the novel’s opening). In *Edna His Wife*, this might be the outcome a savvy reader would expect, but Barnes deliberately destroys any chance for this outcome – systematically removing one possibility for happiness after another.

As discussed above, in the opening scene of the novel the narrator describes the protagonist as dressed in a “symphony of black” and indicates that she may be in mourning. This detail, one of few things we know about Edna at this point besides the fact that the title establishes her as "His Wife," leads the reader to view Edna in this opening scene as a widow. She attends a romantic film, and “in the friendly shelter of the darkness, she began to cry very quietly, pointlessly, as if over some story that had nothing to do with the one that the picture told” (9). Given the fairytale beginning of the romance between Paul and Edna portrayed in the "Blue Island" episode of the novel (which immediately follows the Prelude), Edna's situation at the novel's opening seems an undesirable and unexpected ending for a "family romance." However, throughout the rest of the novel, the mismatch between Edna and Paul becomes more and more apparent,
and therefore this seemingly undesirable ending becomes a fantasy outcome for Edna. This is the path her imagination takes more and more frequently, euphemistically: "If I should outlive Paul -' [...] never with brutal frankness, 'If Paul should die -'" (543).

However, Edna cannot formulate the end to this statement, no matter how carefully she couches the thought. She begins to think, "'I would...' but after that it was never quite clear" (543). This is clearly one of Edna’s many inarticulate suppressions, a feeling on which she cannot act, part of a life full of vague bewilderment.

These thoughts lead Edna to try to imagine an ending for herself, a way to finish her own story if left without Paul to set her course for her. She settles on living with her sister, Pearl. Again, however, this thought necessitates a subsequent thought: "But only if Pearl 'outlived' Shoob. Here, Edna always shivered. Her thoughts were becoming a necrology" (544). Edna's conclusion to these thoughts is that "she really could not picture a life without Paul. A life he had not determined" (544). The narrator reminds us that her thoughts repeat this pattern frequently, despite Edna's own horror at their morbidity.

Thus, the Prelude leads the reader to expect Edna to be widowed, and the unfolding of the plot makes this seem like a desirable outcome. Because of the tension between the reader’s understanding of Edna’s situation and her own comparative lack of understanding, the reader comes to the conclusion that this would be a happy ending long before Edna starts fantasizing about widowhood. However, at the end of the novel, when the chronological course of the narrative catches up to the scene described in the Prelude, Edna is not a widow. She has not been freed from her painfully cold marriage or the
knowledge of her husband’s long-term infidelity; instead, the reader sees the scenes that immediately preceded the Prelude: Edna has just returned from Chicago, where she went to attend Pearl during an illness with food poisoning. Pearl dies while Edna is making her way to Chicago on the train, and Edna ends up having to attend her funeral and returning to New York. When Edna returns to New York, the narrator describes her complete lack of solace and support. Her one remaining fantasy for a happy life is gone, her children are not near her to comfort her, and she cannot even dote upon her grandchildren, who are inaccessible in the care of their nanny.

Thus, the narrator strips away all hope of a positive outcome for Edna's story. As Edna "cast[s] about in her mind for the distractions New York might offer," every alternative fails her. All of the comforts that her economic class make available to her are inadequate: "shopping? - there was nothing that she needed. A facial and wave? - the irony of that was too plain" (628). Edna realizes that none of these things can comfort her, but she is "unconscious of the deeper irony of the fact that nothing which the might and the majesty of man had created or stored in that imperial city - save one thing - could offer her the anodyne she was seeking" (628). Consumerism and the myths of the cult of beauty, as well as the myths of family, all fail Edna in this final desperate moment.

Edna's final loneliness is made more acute by the fact that she has just seen the results of a loving marriage of equals - Susan and Elmer Peebles. Susan's daughter Polly meets Edna at the train in Chicago and is there for her throughout the ordeal - providing comfort in a way that Edna knows would never have occurred to her own children. In this poignant ending, Edna and the reader both face the harsh reality of Edna’s life. She has
been failed by all of the myths that Nancy and Peter Rabinowitz argue the novel sets out to interrogate, and the reader is faced with a number of frustrated expectations. Indeed, the novel sets up those expectations to highlight how fundamentally flawed the traditional plot is; the happy ending in this novel exists only in the movie that Edna watches in the novel’s opening.

The final example (and one of the most overt) of submerged experimentation in *Edna His Wife* is Barnes’s choice to focus not on the war, as is typical in middlebrow as well as highbrow fiction of the time, but rather on the influenza pandemic. Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz argue that it is Edna’s stupidity that naturally leads to the novel’s focus on the personal, inconsequential details of her life, rather than on large issues of worldwide significance, such as the Great War. Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz see the war and the depression as “actively absent” because they are present in the reader’s consciousness but absent in Edna’s. The novel clearly deals extensively in “active absences,” such as the absence of traditional plot structures, and even the absence of Paul’s death at the end of the novel, which the reader has been encouraged to expect. However, there is more to it than this. While it is true that the War seems less significant to Edna than the trials of finding help in Washington D.C., it is also true that the novel shows the fundamental truth about the national consciousness of any war. For Edna, the war only really exists to the extent that she involves herself (rather abstractly) in the activities surrounding it. It exists in the khaki that surrounds her (on soldiers, in her knitting) and in her housekeeping (she valiantly uses Crisco and Karo in place of butter and sugar). Most vividly, the war exists in the attack on her brother-in-law Shoob, whose
A dachshund is stoned by a gang of boys on the streets of Chicago. Shoob, who is of German descent, is injured in the stoning, and loses his ability to play the violin, and therefore the ability to support his wife (Edna’s sister, Pearl).

While critics see Edna’s lack of attention to the war as an indictment of her intelligence and social consciousness (and perhaps of her creator's as well), Edna’s view mirrors that of many Americans – she only dwells on the war when it touches her personally. In addition, Barnes chooses to represent an event that is virtually absent from high-art novels of the period: the influenza outbreak of 1918-1919. The influenza was a worldwide pandemic that killed more people than the Great War. While the trenches were distant from the green streets of Washington, D.C., the influenza gripped the entire nation, affecting civilians, soldiers training to go to war, and soldiers already at or on their way to the front.

While Barnes does not devote much text to the war itself, she carefully details the effect of the flu panic in Washington. Edna, unable to help with the war effort beyond the knitting of sweaters and the rolling of bandages, is active on the “front line” of the pandemic:

Edna volunteered in answer to the call for amateur nurses. […] Inwardly panic-stricken, she packed the Cadillac with thermos bottles of hot soup and thin gruel, and, donning a white influenza mask that was saturated in carbolic acid, went into the dreary boarding-houses. In them she found landladies too terrified to do more than place a bottle of milk on the threshold of a sick-room and patients who had had no attention for three or four days. She found double beds occupied by delirious girls, whose roommates, still well, had been sleeping on the floor beside them. She found one young bride, hysterical with fever and the fear of a possible miscarriage. The very first day of her nursing, a boy, unconscious, died in her arms of double pneumonia before he had ever been seen by a doctor.
[...] soldiers, too, were dying. Camp Meade was quarantined. Coffins piled high in the railroad station. The city seemed plague-stricken. (333)

Barnes describes a stateside war-zone, and in doing so, is one of the few authors of her time period to chronicle the effects of the pandemic on American morale. The U.S. landscape was not scarred by war as was continental Europe, and Americans did not suffer the heavy casualties sustained by Britain, which also remained, geographically speaking, largely unaffected by the war. For the average American, and for non-Europeans more generally, the flu was a source of a much more real terror than the war ever could be. The flu pandemic invaded boarding houses, and afflicted the rich and poor alike (although, as Barnes notes, “congestion breeds contagion, and the condition of these war workers who lay helpless in furnished lodgings was perfectly appalling” (333)). The narration of this event only occupies about two pages of the novel, but the prose mirrors the feverish tempo of the time. Barnes layers image upon image, no longer using Edna as a reflector; rather, here the narration shifts to an external voice, who can see Edna’s terror as well as “some timorous citizens [who] wore white gauze influenza masks in stores and in office buildings, and even on the streets” (333). This external narrator passes a minimum of judgment, choosing instead to simply describe the scene. Since the reader does not ever get a description of actual war, this period of pandemic thus looms largest in the reader’s consciousness. As in the Prelude, this shift in narrative voice cues the reader to notice this section, which would otherwise be buried in the middle of the novel. This cuing of the authorial audience, along with the tension established by denying the reader’s expectations of having the war narrated and instead narrating the flu pandemic, firmly establishes this section of the novel as an instance of submerged experimentation,
again questioning the types of plot that readers typically find narratable. The flu pandemic goes almost entirely unwritten, overshadowed by the spectacle of the Great War. However, Barnes’s narration of it in place of the Great War elevates it to narratable status, and interrogates the system that values the narration of a war (traditionally masculine and aggressive, fought by men) over that of an epidemic (traditionally something that must be passively suffered through, and “fought” by women).

Indeed, the representation of the pandemic offers perhaps the clearest example of the context-bound nature of narratability and thus of submerged experimentation with the limits of the tellable. Under normal circumstances, the illness and death associated with a worldwide pandemic would be highly narratable; however, the specific context of the 1918-1919 pandemic ensured that it was overshadowed, and rendered subnarratable, by the conflict of the Great War. Similarly, submerged experimentation is highly contingent on its context, as each chapter of this dissertation will show. Barnes “passed” as a conventional middlebrow by making the majority of her prose conventional, and at least appearing to abide by the conventions governing plot and characterization in her genre.

But Barnes subtly cued a select group of readers to the submerged experimentation in her novel, creating complex tensions within the text.

Conclusion

There are thus striking similarities between Woolf’s and Barnes’s texts; although their modes of experimentation take different forms in different contexts, both novels expand the limits of the narratable. The submerged experimentation in Barnes’s novel relies on a limited group of careful, trained readers, who will pick up on the author’s
clues. Interestingly, the point of greatest divergence between the two novels is how much value is given to the domestic. *Mrs. Dalloway* ultimately grants great power and great value to the realm of the domestic, offering it up as a model for artistic creation, and indeed *as* a form of artistic creation in its own right. *Edna His Wife*, on the other hand, shows the domestic as flawed, oppressive, and lacking in comfort and consolation for the protagonist. However, this may be because Edna is increasingly isolated from the types of domestic tasks that Clarissa takes part in; a major theme in the novel is how isolated from her own home and domestic duties Edna finds herself as she moves up the social ladder. Whereas Clarissa is able to claim those activities as her own, Edna gives them over to “the help” and finds herself alone and alienated, unable to perform any of the tasks for which her upbringing prepared her.

To return to Warhol’s discussion of neonarrative from the beginning of this chapter, I would argue that both Woolf’s and Barnes’s novels expand the limits of narratability, without necessarily drawing attention to the fact that they are doing so. Both Woolf and Barnes stretch narrative boundaries – with Barnes using submerged experimentation to ensure that this stretching of narrative boundaries is only consciously noticed by a select group of readers. The result of the stretching of these narrative boundaries is the narration of a traditionally undervalued realm of human experience. Barnes in particular offers a harsh critique of established social institutions, and Woolf posits a radical alternative to those institutions in Clarissa’s domestic artistry. Overtly and covertly, both of these authors engage in a complex form of experimentation with the subnarratable.
Warhol is careful to explain that she does not see this list as exhaustive, and that the four categories she offers could coexist with many other possibilities.

As Allison Pease argues in *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*, modernist art was instrumental in producing a fundamental change in the way that the body, particularly the sexual body, was represented in art. According to Pease, the concept of the aesthetic that developed in England from the eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century (following Shaftesbury and Kant) was one that increasingly cultivated an observer who contemplated art in a “disinterested stasis” leading to moments of universal intellectual apprehension. In contrast, low and mass-cultural media provoked subjects to respond in interested, often physical and sexual ways. In addition to noting these changing conceptions of art, Pease argues that in repressing and erasing the body and its responses from the realm of art, the middle class attempted to disavow their own bodies as well as distance themselves from (and constitute themselves in opposition to) the masses. The masses (most often the working classes, but as Pease shows this designation could also include women, children, or any other group perceived as lacking control over their own bodies or sexual responses) were labeled as disease, contagion, and “as impetuous, physically oriented, and mentally inferior.” The middle classes felt it necessary to separate themselves from the masses and the characteristics associated with them – and this impulse became stronger and more pervasive as the traditional distinctions of education and literacy eroded in the wake of universal education. Thus, the domain of the aesthetic increasingly reflected the middle class conception of a disinterested subjectivity, one which was free of the failings assigned to the masses.

However, this separation was not stable or permanent. At the end of the nineteenth century, artists began to appropriate techniques, patterns, and even subject matter from the most “debased” of mass media: pornography. As Pease demonstrates, *Ulysses*, one of the twentieth century’s most well known highbrow accomplishments, borrowed heavily from and engaged actively with the conventions of pornography.

Pease argues that similar redemptive motives were at work when modernist artists incorporated the obscene into their art. Both artists and critics justified the overt incorporation of the obscene into the realm of high art when previously the two realms had been seen as mutually exclusive. Artists, reviewers, critics, and even lawyers and judges ultimately excused the obscenity in *Ulysses* and texts like it because of the formal mastery they demonstrated. It was the combination of a display of formal mastery on the part of the artist with a resultant difficulty for the reader that rendered texts like *Ulysses* acceptable (when they were deemed so). Pease neatly summarizes the situation: “The *Dublin Review* was relieved that “As for the general reader, it is, as it were, so much rotten caviare [a high-cultural signifier if ever there was one, though in this case working to suggest the degenerate (AP)], and the public is in no particular danger of understanding or being corrupted thereby.” Thus extracted, the reviews all...
share an abhorrence of the general, the popular, and the new class of clerks and typists that emerged with their small disposable incomes […] Where the works of Beardsley or Joyce seemed to cater to the mass’s sensuous tastes through sexualized representations, the middle-class defenders of high culture trembled. Yet where the works provided difficulty, reserve, and elegance of form – all signifiers of a higher aesthetic that enforces distance – the reviewers delighted” (81). By demonstrating their mastery of form and manipulating the conventions of a mass-culture genre, modernist artists transformed the obscene into the aesthetic. The artist appropriated the language and techniques of pornography and other mass-culture media were likewise co-opted to achieve individual aesthetic goals.

4 See James Phelan, Living to Tell About It (1-30).

5 Indeed, even in her diaries Woolf uses domestic activities as metaphors for art: “But I have still to read the first chapters, & confess to dreading the madness rather; & being clever. However, I’m sure I’ve now got to work with my pick at my seam […] Suppose one can keep the quality of a sketch in a finished & composed work?” (Woolf, Diary 312).

6 Some examples of critics who saw Woolf’s method as innovative but her subject matter as unimportant or beneath notice include: John W. Crawford’s “One Day in London the Subject of Mrs. Woolf’s New Novel” (1925) (this review stands out in that it specifically identifies some of the domestic activities Clarissa takes part in. Interestingly, while Crawford does attend to these details, they are only considered as part of a character sketch, not as an integral part of the novel’s design); Dudley Carew’s “Virginia Woolf” (1926); “Fifty Books of Fiction of the Past Six Months” (1925); Conrad Aiken’s “The Novel as Work of Art.” (1927); and Gerald Sykes’s “Modernism” (1931). Sykes’s review refers to The Waves, but is particularly interesting because Sykes labels Woolf’s style “tea-room modernism.” He distinguishes between a novel like The Waves and Ulysses because “the matter did not necessitate the form of ‘The Waves.’” Sykes implies that Woolf’s focus on the domestic places her in a different class than “real” modernist artists.

7 Clarissa’s room is not, strictly speaking, a room of her own, since as far as the reader knows, Clarissa does not have an income of her own--so the room actually belongs to Richard.

8 Edwin Muir, writing in The Nation: "Virginia Woolf" (1926).

9 She was even interviewed about what it was like to be a “distinguished authoress” (Provines 13).
The authors illustrate that many of the early critical assessments of Barnes’s work were clearly influenced more by her sex and subject matter than by a careful study of her work. Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz wish to demonstrate that Barnes is a novelist “worth rediscovery,” who “though her theme creates some significant rhetorical challenges for her, she meets them with a skill that demonstrates a sure grasp of literary technique” (133). In the rest of the article, Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz illustrate that Barnes’s entire purpose with the plot is to debunk both the Horatio Alger myth and what they call the Cinderella myth (beautiful young woman achieves her dream by marrying a handsome man who supplies her every material desire). Barnes’s challenge here, as Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz see it, is to depict Paul with enough detail and insight to make him real, but still portray him as “unpitiable, unenviable, unvillainous” (138-9). In other words, in order to make the point that women pay the highest price in the modern myth of American industrialism, Barnes has to show us a man who is not a villain. This is because readers must leave the text blaming the system, not the individual man; yet that man must also not be an unqualified success, lest we believe the myth is achievable. Thus Barnes must make Paul unsympathetic, but not evil, and shallow and insensitive, but not purposely cruel.

I do not mean to imply that Barnes’s novel stands out from other middlebrow works because it is artfully written. In fact, my argument is that many middlebrow works were artful and experimental. However, the moments that I focus on here stand out both from most of the prose in Edna His Wife and from the prose in most of Barnes’s oeuvre, which is why I argue that they function as powerful cues to the authorial audience.

While middlebrow novels were not the bastions of conservativism they were often accused of being, I have found that even among those novels that deal frankly with sex, STDs, and women’s bodies, Edna His Wife stands out (not least because it is not, generically, declaring itself to be a “racy” novel) with longer and more detailed descriptions - though decidedly not sexualized – of women’s bodies. Barnes describes the minutiae of women’s bodies with scientific detail and objectivity: wrinkles, cellulite, etc.

Within the novel, the women Edna looks up to are the epitome of this look: Viola Sloan is tall, thin and elegant in a chic black gown (as opposed to Edna’s pink frock with what she realizes are tacky accessories); Paul’s mistress Katharine Boyne is also tall, thin, and slightly boyish when Edna meets her in the hospital.

Named after illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, the “Gibson Girl” was a popular image of ideal femininity. This image was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, though popular well into the teens and perhaps even the twenties, is marked by an older style than many of the flapper-style images popularized in the teens.
and twenties. Edna’s attachment to the Gibson Girl might mark her as old-fashioned in comparison to many of the women she meets – even Barnes’s description of Cora Truesdale indicates that she has evolved since her days as a Gibson bride.

As Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz observe, one of the chief challenges of reading *Edna His Wife* as a “serious” novel (or reading it at all) is the dullness of its heroine. Despite the description of the carefully outfitted middle-aged woman Barnes offers in the Prelude, Edna Losser Jones is most certainly not a “smart heroine,” either in the sense of intelligence and wit or fashion and social sense. However, I believe Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz overstate Edna’s stupidity. While she is clearly shown to be ignorant of the social conventions of the class into which her marriage carries her, she is also shown to be emotionally perceptive and her primary failings are those of ignorance and naïveté, rather than stupidity. I do not think that reading Edna in this way, rather than as a model of stupidity and helplessness, undermines the essential argument of “Legends of Toothpaste…” In fact, the argument is bolstered when the novel is read in the context that has for so long condemned it – that of a bestselling novel by a bestselling novelist who was extraordinarily popular for a period of time.

Probably the most well-known book about the flu epidemic is Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939). William Maxwell’s *They Came Like Swallows* (1937) is also about the flu epidemic. In addition, H.D.’s novel, *Asphodel*, which I discuss in Chapter 3, also touches on the flu epidemic.
Chapter 3
Intertextual Constructions of Character in H.D.’s *Asphodel* and Zelda Fitzgerald’s “Miss Ella”

As the title indicates, the central concern of this chapter will be how issues of intertextuality intersect with issues of character and characterization. It has become commonplace in narrative theory to open an argument involving character with the lament that no satisfactory theory of character exists, and that our understanding of it is split among several, perhaps incompatible, theoretical approaches. Rather than focus on the lack of consensus, this chapter will draw on the diversity of narrative theory’s contributions to our understanding of character in combination with the equally productive insights of feminist theorists, who have developed a rich body of work on character in the past several decades. My chapter at once builds upon and reframes this prior feminist work on character by exploring how intertextuality bears on methods of characterization used by two important women writers of the modernist period, namely, H.D. and Zelda Fitzgerald. One a highbrow modernist and the other a middlebrow author, both writers interrogate models of character by positioning their characters vis-à-vis specific intertexts. In particular, H.D.’s novel and Zelda Fitzgerald’s short story self-consciously comment on the viability of female characters in the twentieth century through explorations of the female artist character and the female “average American”
character respectively. I argue that while H.D. envisions a possibility for the fruition or
evolution of the female artist character, as long as this character does not rely solely on
past female artist models, Fitzgerald suggests that the female “average American”
character will remain hopelessly constrained by traditional models of identity and forms
of characterization.

Comparing a highbrow author, H.D., with a middlebrow author, Fitzgerald,
produces a nuanced understanding of character as a fulcrum of both narrative
experimentation and experimentation with gendered norms, however covert the
experimentation may be. Each author experiments with female characters in ways that
challenge both literary and social boundaries, even while adhering to the expectations of
their likely audiences. More generally, as in my other chapters, I compare middlebrow
and highbrow modernist authors to suggest the complex modes of exchange that were
taking place in the modernist period – not just highbrow authors borrowing from the
popular realm, but also middlebrow authors actively engaging, in a submerged way, with
the experimental activities of their highbrow counterparts. In this chapter, the overt play
with intertexts that we find in H.D. – a play that allows H.D. to explore strategies for
narrative self-fashioning for female artists – is complemented by Fitzgerald’s submerged
experimentation with character as an intertextual construct.

Feminist theorists have long been interested in the construction of character,
particularly female characters.\textsuperscript{2} For example, Dale Bauer, in her book Feminist
Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community, examines Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,
demonstrating how Edna as a character is both a product of the society Chopin writes
about and a critique of that society. Bauer’s analysis is typical of the productive work done by feminist theorists in its careful attention to the traditions and social structures that contribute to the creation of a character, both inside and outside the text. Bauer’s analysis of Chopin is particularly intriguing in how it brings into focus the intersection of character with specific intertexts (in this case, medical and social theories contemporary with the composition of the novel). Many feminist narratologists draw on more conventional narrative theory in order to deepen their understanding of character as both narratively and historically meaningful. Ruth Page, in her essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, uses a classic concept of narratology, the notion of characters as actants, in the service of a feminist analysis of character in Angela Carter’s novel *New Eve*. By using the concept of actants, which has often been criticized as reductive or ahistorical, Page is able to trace the complexities of gender identity and sexual desire in the novel. Similarly, Casie Hermansson fruitfully combines feminist and narratological aims in *Reading Feminist Intertextuality Through Bluebeard Stories*. Hermansson critiques traditional notions of intertextuality, arguing that when intertextuality puts into conversation two or more texts that still privilege a master plot, the intertextuality is inherently monologic, rather than dialogic as it is frequently assumed to be by critics. Finally, in an approach that closely resembles my own, Sarah Gates, in her article “Intertextual Estella: *Great Expectations*, Gender, and Literary Tradition,” examines the character of Estella in Dickens’ novel in light of specific intertexts, which results in a more nuanced understanding of Estella as a character than previous accounts have offered. In particular, Gates is able to attend to, and offer a compelling reading of, the
contradictory elements of Estella’s character in light of three key intertexts. Gates argues that these intertexts are present in the novel to help readers come to a richer understanding of Estella than Pip, the narrator, is able to reach.

Building on this prior work and on larger debates surrounding character and intertextuality, the present chapter examines how H.D. and Zelda Fitzgerald both use intertextuality in ways that call into question existing models of character and characterization. I also use James Phelan’s model of character as a dynamic combination of mimetic, thematic, and synthetic dimensions to show how each author’s use of intertextuality develops different aspects of her main character. My discussion explores how both authors engaged intertextually with their own oeuvres, and Fitzgerald, a middlebrow author, also engaged intertextually with highbrow texts, thereby recruiting from the experimental energies of those texts. In addition, I show that, in Asphodel, H.D. chooses classical intertexts, a typically highbrow form of experimentation, in order to demonstrate the potential destructiveness of the models such intertexts provide. By illuminating the links between highbrow and middlebrow characters, this chapter not only illustrates the range of textual practices in the early twentieth century but also reclaims middlebrow modernism as an important site for innovative methods of characterization.

H.D.’s novel Asphodel provides a model of highbrow experimentation with character via the self-conscious accumulation, and manipulation, of intertexts. In addition to highly experimental prose, H.D. uses a series of intertexts to suggest the danger of constructing the character of a female artist around existing models, both for characters in the storyworld and for the author constructing the characters who inhabit the

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storyworld. Fitzgerald’s “Miss Ella” uses one specific intertext to illustrate the constraints authors face in the characterization of female characters, as well as the constraints faced by characters in their storyworlds. In the case of Fitzgerald, the middlebrow author, the experimentation is concealed, or submerged. As outlined in Chapter 1, the mode of submerged experimentation varies according to the dominant norms under which the author works. In middlebrow texts formally experimental aspects are frequently disguised by the dominance of the conventional prose, or by recourse to an authorial persona that encourages most readers to classify the text as conventional regardless of formal features. Fitzgerald exploits her persona as an author (which was firmly middlebrow), along with an anecdotal tone, to distract readers from the formally experimental aspects of her fiction. This version of submerged experimentation results in an interplay of formal and thematic concerns that highlights the complexities surrounding the construction of character through narrative. Despite the differences in each author’s material conditions of production, both authors reflect on issues of narrative authority and, more specifically, the importance of recognizing where such authority rests in the construction of character. Ultimately, I read both texts against the grain, arguing that H.D.’s text, despite being strikingly experimental, is actually less chaotic and more teleological than has previously been argued, while Fitzgerald’s text is considerably more experimental than has been recognized, and is actively engaged with highbrow experimentalism.

“My Name Is Hermione”
As one of the more overtly experimental texts of highbrow modernism, H.D.’s *Asphodel* exploits the stream-of-consciousness narration found in other high-modernist texts, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses*. *Asphodel* also features extensive intertextual connections, another common highbrow technique. Highbrow modernist works are famously allusive, and many of the leaders of highbrow modernism, including H.D., were also (amateur or professional) classicists and translators. Modernist texts in general, and *Asphodel* in particular, are thus frequently engaged with other texts, especially with texts associated with an older tradition, often depicted as tragically lost. In *Asphodel*, H.D. uses an almost overwhelming amount of intertextuality in a typically highbrow engagement with issues of character. In particular, H.D. traces a lengthy genealogy of character types to suggest the inadequacy, and even danger, of existing narrative models of female character.

Although *Asphodel* wasn’t published until 1992, the period and context of its composition situate it as an exemplary modernist text. *Asphodel* was composed over a period of time from 1921-22. It was one of H.D.’s first attempts at a fictional rendering of her life as an artist and woman in the years leading up to and during World War I. H.D. continued to build on this first piece, writing *HERmione* in 1926-27. She later returned to *Asphodel*, revising it to serve as a sequel to *HERmione* and to make the two novels stylistically consistent.³ *Asphodel* begins with Hermione Gart (the H.D. figure), touring France with Fayne Rabb and Clara Rabb, Fayne’s mother. The novel chronicles Hermione’s love for Fayne, the break between the two women, and the two characters' eventual marriages. It then details Hermione’s two wartime pregnancies, her break with
husband Jerrold Darrington, and the beginnings of her relationship with Beryl de Rothfeldt. The novel is clearly meant to be a *roman à clef*, in the sense that every major character has a real world equivalent, and the events of the novel are closely based on H.D.’s life. H.D. even included a list of “dramatis personae” on the front page of the manuscript for *HERmione*. Ezra Pound appears in the novel as George Lowndes, Jerrold Darrington is H.D.’s real life husband Richard Aldington, and Beryl de Rothfeldt is H.D.’s lifelong companion Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman). However, *Asphodel* is more than a *roman à clef*; it is also a carefully constructed representation of some of the most important years of H.D.’s development, both artistically and personally.

The novel remained unpublished until 1992; because of this fact, there is no evidence about contemporary readers’ reception of the text. It is important to note that, contrary to popular belief, *Asphodel* likely remained unpublished because H.D. viewed it as a draft of *Madrigal*, rather than because she viewed it as too revealing or experimental to be published (Spoo x). Once the novel was finally published, it was treated as a scholarly curiosity, rather than a text capable of receiving a positive popular response. But even scholars, with a few notable exceptions, have avoided *Asphodel* as an object of critical study. I address *Asphodel* here because it exemplifies the larger movements in highbrow modernist experimentation, a quality that makes the text worthy of critical attention while also making it relevant for an investigation of the relationship between the highbrow and the middlebrow during the period in which the text was composed.

Formally, *Asphodel* is ostentatiously experimental, with a stream-of-consciousness that is so focused on the central character’s idiosyncratic mind-style that
readers almost never get an external viewpoint in two hundred pages of prose. The narrative fluctuates primarily between free indirect and free direct discourse. The intertextuality is similarly extreme. Even for a highbrow modernist novel, the number and variety of intertextual allusions are overwhelming. Indeed, the formal construction of *Asphodel* is so overtly experimental that it has led many critics to see chaos and disorder as part of its purpose. Susan Stanford Friedman, one of the few scholars to explore *Asphodel* in depth, considers it “a profoundly nonteleological text […] that keeps the reader grasping for the simple externalities of the plot” (172). I argue, by contrast, that the text only *appears* to be nonteleological. Beneath the appearance of disorder is a text carefully constructed to reflect the arduous enterprise of modeling a female artist character as well as the difficulty of being a female artist in a storyworld that closely resembles the real world of the author herself. In *Asphodel*, H.D. uses a range of intertexts to suggest Hermione’s search for a viable model of self, and to highlight the inadequacy of the identity paradigms that are available to her.

To better understand the development of Hermione as a character, I use James Phelan’s concept of character and narrative progression, developed in “Character, Progression, and the Mimetic-Didactic Distinction.” In this and subsequent works, Phelan develops the idea of narrative progression, which refers to the processes by which authors “generate, develop, and resolve readers’ interests in narratives” (Phelan 285). Phelan’s model requires an understanding of character as made up of attributes or signs, each of which participates in a mimetic sphere (the attribute can be viewed as a trait), a thematic sphere (the attribute can be viewed as typical of a class of people
or representative of some idea), and a synthetic sphere (the attribute can be viewed as the material out of which the character is made and it can be seen to have such and such a role in the making of the artificial object that is the narrative). The work itself then may or may not convert these dimensions into functions; the traits of a character may or may not coalesce into the portrait of a possible person, the potentially representative quality of the attribute may or may not be actualized, and the artificiality of the character may or may not become an issue in the narrative. (285)

According to Phelan’s model, “progression may involve the elements of either story – characters, events, setting – or discourse – the way the story is told – or it may involve elements of both” (285). Specifically of interest to my discussion here is the fact that “the movement of most narratives depends at least to some degree on the introduction, complication, and resolution (to one degree or another) of instabilities at the level of story” (285) as well as potential instability at the level of discourse (the latter of which Phelan refers to as tension for the sake of clarity). In the case of H.D.’s novel, each local instability does move the plot forward, but at the same time, as the narrative progresses, it appears to get further from resolving the global instability.

As a novel of development generally, and a künstlerroman specifically, the goal of Asphodel is the creation of an environment in which Hermione, the protagonist, can work. H.D. introduces two interrelated global instabilities--Hermione's quest to become an artist and her quest to integrate her work as artist with her life as a woman. Throughout the novel, Hermione’s artistic goals are cast as inappropriate⁵, and this inappropriateness is mirrored and reinforced in the character models she chooses to identify with throughout the novel. As a künstlerroman, Asphodel focuses on “the conditions of possibility (or impossibility) for creative activity” (Varsamopoulou xiii).
Elsewhere in H.D.’s work, there is a similar focus on “the conditions necessary for the production of literature […]. Writing […] is explored through the harsh realities of the writer’s toil to overcome political, social, economic and historical odds in order to produce her text” (Varsamopoulou 83). Similarly, in Asphodel, the conditions for artistic thought are more important than the actual creative work (the novel does not reproduce poems or even represent the process of writing). H. D.’s project in this novel focuses on Hermione’s intellectual activity and what makes that activity possible, or not.

In the novel, H.D. stages narrative self-fashioning by having Hermione bring herself into dialectical relationships with the stories of other female characters. Asphodel thus chronicles Hermione Gart’s attempts to define her own identity by identifying with literary or historical models. There are four main phases of Hermione's development as a mimetic character, each one associated with one or more intertextual figures. Moreover, those associations are crucial to the dynamics of her thematic and synthetic functions. Hermione’s ongoing attempts to become a functioning artist and to reconcile that identity with her identity as a woman are the global textual instabilities that drive the narrative progression, motivating each identification, each of which in turn produces a new instability. As Hermione attempts to follow each of these characters as a model, H.D. illustrates the flaws in each through the instabilities they introduce into the narrative. Thus, the sources of Hermione’s narrative self-fashioning are always antithetical to H.D.’s larger aims in the novel. The intertextual nature of this process emphasizes that H.D.’s struggle with creating a female character, and Hermione’s struggle to create a sense of self, are centered around, and perhaps even created by, the
classical tradition that they interact with. That these figures are literary also emphasizes the synthetic aspect of each model, and of Hermione herself. The reader’s awareness of the synthetic nature of Hermione and her models reinforces how this is a novel that is ultimately about the process of creating identity at the mimetic level, but that, at the synthetic level, also concerns the process of creating a character. The novel is a künstlerroman on the mimetic level, but also a self-conscious reflection on the production of a künstlerroman at the synthetic level.

The first figure Hermione identifies with in this process is Joan of Arc. Hermione is touring Rouen with the Rabbs, and is overwhelmed by the associations evoked by the guidebook and the marker in the street:

“Did she die here?” O, but she couldn’t, she couldn’t have died, the smoke wreathing in its hideous obscene while upward across these (perhaps) very roofs. “I can’t believe that she died here.” But O horrible, horrible suppose it had never happened. Suppose that it was going to happen. For it never could have happened, but it was true. (7-8)

Joan as a figure is thematically linked to her death as a martyr, and by Hermione’s logic, for those who identify with Joan there is no avoiding Joan’s death or one like it. It becomes clear during the course of the passage that Joan’s death is unavoidable because it represents the reality of what happens when women transgress social, religious, and artistic boundaries. Hermione sees Joan’s martyrdom as a direct result of her unwillingness to conceal her difference from the world. For H.D. and Hermione, Joan’s religious visions are directly connected to artistic vision and genius; although Hermione does not literally hear voices, she identifies powerfully with Joan:

And they had caught her. Caught her. Trapped her with her armour and her panache and her glory and her pride. They had trapped her, a girl who
was a boy and they would always do that. They would always trap them, bash their heads like broken flowers from their stalks, break them for seeing things, having “visions” seeing things like she did and like Fayne Rabb. This was the warning. (9)

Hermione sees Joan of Arc’s fate as a warning to other women, women who, like Hermione and Fayne have “visions” or artistic tendencies. Hermione’s emphasis on Joan’s panache, glory, and pride implies that it isn’t necessarily just difference in women that is punished – it is specifically women who embrace that difference, who defy convention openly and proudly who have the most to fear. Hermione and Fayne’s attempts to get their poetry published (via George Lowndes) and Hermione’s hope that they might live an openly artistic life in London are, thus, the activities that are most threatening to the social norms.

She’s a saint now. I’d be a saint if I let them get to me. So would Fayne Rabb. I don’t want to be burnt, to be crucified just because I “see” things sometimes. O Jeanne, you shouldn’t ever, ever have told them that you saw things. You shouldn’t have. (10)

For Hermione it is not Joan’s military strength that is most significant but rather her visions and voices. While Joan of Arc was a prominent figure in both the women’s suffrage movement and British World War I propaganda, H.D. does not use this historic figure to represent women’s agency or potential for leadership.9 Rather, she uses Joan of Arc to represent women’s struggle against the restrictions of social norms. Moreover, H.D. suggests that Hermione sees Joan as a vessel, as a messenger of something divine, which is also how H.D. conceptualized authorship.10

Hermione’s identification with Joan, a strong and outspoken visionary/prophet figure, goes beyond simply seeing herself as a victim. While Joan functions thematically
to suggest the potential punishment in store for female visionaries, mimetically she represents a real model of a woman who defied society. Hermione identifies with this aspect of Joan because she needs such a model to legitimize her claims to authorship.

H.D. further emphasizes the synthetic components of Joan and Hermione by connecting Joan to a more ancient, mythical (and therefore constructed) female line of Greek warrior goddesses: “No monument. Nothing. France was all her monument. O queen, Artemis, Athene. You came to life in Jeanne d’Arc” (10). By connecting Joan of Arc to a more ancient mythic past, Hermione attempts to create an artistic genealogy. At the same time, the synthetic nature of those figures (in a society that views them as literary or mythical, rather than religious) underscores the synthetic nature of the models Hermione chooses, and in turn, the synthetic nature of Hermione herself. By raising the reader’s awareness of the synthetic nature of Hermione’s models, and therefore of Hermione, H.D. implies that the difficulties Hermione faces in the storyworld extend to the difficulties that the author faces in the construction of Hermione as a character.

In the first stage of the novel, Hermione attempts to separate the figure of Joan as visionary from Joan’s thematic function as a martyr, or a representative of what happens to women who transgress. Hermione conceives of Joan as a sacrifice which made her own artistic life possible, despite frequent signals that society still punishes women like Joan. Indeed, Joan is only available to Hermione and H.D. as an intertextual model because of her status as a martyr; without her death and eventual beatification in 1920, Joan’s potency as a symbol of female creativity and power would have been far less prominent. At the same time, Hermione’s attempt to divorce Joan from her thematic
function draws attention to Hermione’s own thematic function as an example of what happens to young women who defy convention.

At the end of the novel’s first section, the instability introduced by Hermione choosing Joan as her model reaches a crisis when Shirley, a close friend and another solitary female “visionary,” commits suicide. The people who surround Hermione insist that if Shirley had simply followed the conventional model and married, she would have lived. At the end of Section I, we see Hermione giving new significance to her relationship with Jerrold Darrington whom she eventually marries. Thus, through Hermione’s identification with Joan, the ultimate failure of that model, and the series of events that follow that failure, H.D. shows that society still punishes women who transgress. Recognizing this state of affairs, Hermione undergoes a dramatic transformation in which she becomes the traditional wife in an effort to satisfy social strictures.

Throughout the first section, Hermione tries, exuberantly at the beginning and with increasing trepidation as the narrative progresses, to live an unconventional life by modeling herself after Joan of Arc, who in turn was linked intertextually to the goddesses Athena and Artemis. Shirley’s death at the end of Part I signals a shift; Hermione abandons the Joan of Arc model for a more conventional one, that of the woman who gives up her life as an individual to become a traditional wife. Instead of choosing a particular intertextual figure, in this second stage, Hermione chooses the generic figure of wife. By referring to a general type rather than a specific person, this section’s intertextuality emphasizes Hermione’s thematic function. She attempts to play the role of
the wife, and lands, instead, in the role of the wronged woman. Because of her name, this identification is inextricably, if never explicitly, linked to Shakespeare’s Hermione, the pure and wrongly accused wife from *A Winter’s Tale*. Hermione refuses this identification in the beginning of the novel, saying that her identity has nothing to do with what other people, even her family, think:

“My grandfather read Shakespeare – that’s why, Hermione. But that’s not me. That’s not me. They can laugh if they want cry if they want, become rhapsodic over Her Gart, Hermione Gart or Hermione. But I’m something different. It’s nothing to do with them. I’m something else. Different.” (53)

At the same time, intertextually this section references more than just Shakespeare’s heroine; it references all of the traditional literary models of womanhood. By assuming the role of wife, Hermione “refers” to a long lineage of “wife” characters, including Penelope (the epitome of the patient, faithful wife). Identifying with the traditional female role of wife and mother resolves the initial instability from the outset of the novel, that of Hermione without a place in the world. The role of wife, however, also introduces a new instability: the restrictions it brings threaten Hermione’s freedom and sanity. Ultimately, identifying with the conventional “wife” character leaves Hermione even further from her goal of becoming an artist, and thus from resolving the global instabilities. By fulfilling this role and identifying with this model, Hermione risks her sanity and her life. In this section, H.D. shows that the model that society offers for women is debilitating and restrictive for a female artist, even when she seems to have every possible advantage on her side, including influential friends and a supportive husband. Furthermore, this section illustrates that, having accepted the traditional model,
Hermione leaves herself vulnerable to being subsumed under a series of increasingly restrictive narratives about women, wives, and mothers.  

Hermione’s shift to the role of wife as a possible model results abruptly, through a jump in chronology and a corresponding gap in the narrative timeline, which flashbacks only partially fill in. Section II opens in London during an air raid. Hermione and Darrington have married, the war has begun, and Hermione is recovering from the stillbirth of her first child. Hermione has just returned from a nursing home and is still confined to bed. Darrington attempts to soothe Hermione by reading poetry to her, Browning’s “The Englishman in Italy,” which recalls to her their happy times in Italy, before the war, and before her pregnancy. Even with the outside threat of the air raid, this scene should be one of domestic tenderness; Darrington is caring for his wife, reading her poetry of her choosing, attempting to keep her quiet and still for her own health, and even obeying her wishes not to go to the basement with everyone else. Throughout the scene, however, Hermione sees herself as distant from Darrington, separated from him. Her mind continually returns to the nursing home where she waited to have her child (there is no mention of Darrington visiting there), where she was moved to the cellar, and where she eventually gave birth to a stillborn child. It is immediately obvious from this opening scene that while Hermione has solved the initial instability by getting married, this solution has introduced a new, and potentially more threatening, instability in Hermione’s inability and unwillingness to satisfy the obligations of a conventional wife. Hermione forces herself to remember that before the war, and before the pregnancy, “Darrington had given her words and the ability to cope with words, to
write words” (114). She had even had a degree of success: “people had been asking her (just before the war) for poems, had written saying that her things had power, individuality, genius” (114). However, focusing on the danger and precariousness of the present moment of the air raid, with only brief flashbacks to the initially happy days of their marriage, H.D. reinforces the instability that marriage brings, rather than its function of saving Hermione from her fate as a martyr in Section I.

Despite having a supportive husband, Hermione finds intellectual and artistic activity impossible during pregnancy. She thinks of that time as a “deadly crucifixion:”

almost a year and her mind glued down, broken, and held back like a wild bird caught in bird-lime. The state she had been in was a deadly crucifixion. Not one torture (though God that had been enough) but months and months when her flaming mind beat and she found she was caught, her mind not taking her as usual like a wild bird but her mind-wings beating, beating and her feet caught, her feet caught, glued like a wild bird in bird-lime. (113)

Here the “flaming mind” of the artist is incompatible with the conditions of childbearing in Hermione’s society. Pregnancy, particularly a difficult or dangerous pregnancy, requires isolation and inactivity, both mental and physical; as a result, Hermione is denied books, intellectual conversation, even the company of her husband. It is this final shock, this final “crucifixion” (echoing the images of Christ that Hermione conflated with Joan of Arc from the beginning of the novel), that suspends Hermione’s artistic and intellectual life. Once she accepts the conventional model she is subject to powerful pressures that dictate her behavior. These forces convince her to have a baby, not to “refuse her womanhood,” even when it is clear that her life is in danger.14 This section is a compelling mimetic portrait of a woman who has lost a child, and it carries a number of
powerful thematic messages as well. H.D. illustrates the danger of sacrificing one’s identity for convention, and the injustices women suffer at the hands of society in the name of childbearing. In addition, H.D. suggests that any marriage, no matter how enlightened, has the potential to become oppressive.

During Hermione’s first pregnancy she is trapped, crucified by the conditions she is forced to live in. The months and months of torture Hermione describes kill not only her infant, but her artistic ability. She emerges from the nursing home, a mother, but not a mother (“I had a baby, I mean I didn’t;” “I am a mother. I mean I am not, was not.”), an artist who is not an artist (122). At the mimetic level, the conditions society imposes upon the pregnant woman stifle Hermione’s artistic ability, and she finds that society’s increasing apathy toward art and books traps her where there is no place for art, or for artists. This apathy is illustrated most forcefully in Darrington, poet turned soldier, who reads Browning to Hermione to help her recover, but then, once in uniform “never took books out […] said Browning was a bore” (124). At the same time, Hermione’s repeated references to crucifixion recall the thematic function of Joan of Arc, and implies that even having aligned herself with a new intertextual model, the previous model of artist (or woman)-as-martyr is still actively informing her conception of self.

Hermione’s feelings of having lost her art and her child are compounded by Darrington’s infidelity, and then his absence when he leaves for France. This represents a low point for Hermione. Not only has she lost (or obscured) her identity as an artist by aligning herself with the traditional wife model, she has now lost Darrington, who was her security against the instability produced by the Joan of Arc model. Faced with the
choice of remaining and playing the faithful wife, or doing something else, Hermione realizes that “she was no Penelope. Cassandra maybe” (139). Here Hermione turns away from the model of the faithful wife and embraces the figure who had previously made her turn in fear to marriage and Darrington. H.D. thus uses intertextual references to juxtapose the contrasting models Hermione must decide between: Penelope functions thematically to invoke the long-suffering, ever-patient wife, while Cassandra is the madwoman, the prophetess, the visionary (and the virgin), whom Hermione associated with Shirley Thornton and whom she feared she would become if she continued to cling to Joan of Arc as a model. With this statement, “she was no Penelope. Cassandra maybe,” which is repeated in the text over the next several pages, Hermione gives up the safety, legitimacy, and imprisonment of Penelope (and Shakespeare’s Hermione, etc) and embraces the danger and freedom of Cassandra. Increasingly, the emphasis is on Hermione’s thematic function, as the text begins to emphasize the thematic significance of each model Hermione chooses or discards. On the literal level of plot, she also begins a romance with Cyril Vane, which will lead to a second pregnancy and an eventual break from Jerrold Darrington.

During this third phase in Hermione’s development she completely embraces a new model, one that includes the thematic properties of her earlier identification with Joan of Arc, but also represents an abandonment of intellect and a more complete separation from society. The most prominent figure that works as a model in this phase is Morgan le Fay, who is first mentioned immediately after Hermione agrees to a first date with Cyril Vane. Morgan le Fay functions thematically to invoke the figure of the
witch; a woman operating outside of and independent from society.\textsuperscript{17} Intertextually, Morgan le Fay refers most directly to \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} and Malory’s \textit{Le Morte D’arthur}, but also to more contemporary incarnations of the Morgan le Fay figure, including several early twentieth century silent film versions.\textsuperscript{18}

In this section of the novel, Hermione imagines herself stepping out of her past and deliberately choosing another identity:

Who was Mrs. Darrington? Mrs. Darrington was a bit of earth and someone, someone else had stepped out of Mrs. Darrington. Mrs. Darrington was a trench, wide and deep and someone else had stepped out and was out and wasn’t Mrs. Darrington. (141)

Hermione travels to Cornwall with Cyril Vane, seeing him as “pre-chasm,” with the chasm representing both the war, which is consistently represented as a break in time and reality, and Mrs. Darrington, the trench in Hermione’s life. To complicate matters, Hermione goes to Cornwall with Darrington’s knowledge and blessing – he tells her she should go, because she can’t survive another season of influenza in London. He also tells her that he is in love with his mistress, but that Hermione should wait for him, and he will return to her. So, Hermione begins in Cornwall as a divided self; part is still Mrs. Darrington, despite her feeling of having left that identity behind, while the other “part of her had got out, was out, was herself, the gold gauze, the untrampled [sic] winged thing, the spirit, if you will or if you will the mere careless nymph, the careless lover, the faithless wife” (148).

Not long after arriving in Cornwall, Hermione becomes pregnant with Cyril’s child. At first, this realization sends her into a panic; she fears a repeat of her first pregnancy experience, and fears that it will destroy any hope of reconciliation with
Darrington. However, Hermione quickly decides that this pregnancy is a mystical event, and that she has become a mystical vessel. She imagines herself as a “painted case […] so hieratically perfect for its receiving,” and her main goal is to remain a vessel for creativity, rather than an artist who actively creates. In this phase, Hermione identifies with Morgan le Fay, isolates herself in a cabin in the woods, and insists that her needs are purely physical, rather than intellectual. This new model is fundamentally at odds with resolving the novel’s global instabilities: modeling herself after Morgan le Fay makes it impossible for Hermione to become a productive artist, because by doing so she denies the intellect that makes artistic activity possible. In addition, because of her withdrawal from society, Hermione is no longer even attempting to reconcile her life as an artist with her life as a woman – she is essentially denying both her identity as a woman and as an artist. Thematically, then, this phase in Hermione’s development also serves to demonstrate the danger of denying the intellect and alienating oneself.

This phase lasts a very short time before there is another period of transition—this time to the final version of character represented in the novel. Hermione has shut herself up in a cabin in the woods, assuring herself that her only needs are physical and that her own “witch-craft” can provide for those needs. Into this world comes a (at first) nameless figure who forces Hermione to come out of her seclusion and to rediscover her intellect. This figure turns out to be Beryl, but Hermione first knows her as a “girl (who is she?) [who] has read my lyrics, has never met a ‘poet,’ wants to meet a poet, has been to Greece” (167). Just this scant introduction forces Hermione to recall a previous time, a happier time, and one where she was deeply involved in active artistic creation, “Why
Greece? […] Greece is a thing of rocks that jag into you, every Greek line of poetry breaks you, jags into you” (167). The memories of poetry and of her connection to classicism is painful, recalling as they do the beginning of her marriage, and that pain is part of why she has embraced her Morgan le Fay identity so completely. Despite her desire to stay isolated in her cottage, Hermione goes to meet the girl, and, looking into her eyes, recovers a part of herself that had been lost in Mrs. Darrington and in Morgan le Fay:

…when she looked into two blue eyes across the […] tea table […] Hermione remembered her name, Hermione, my name is Hermione. Hermione was the mother of Helen, or was Hermione the daughter of Helen. Hermione, Helen and Harmonia. Hymen and Heliodora. Names that began with H and H was a white letter. H was the snow on mountains and Hermione (who now remembered that her name was Hermione) remembered snow on mountains… (168)

Hermione remembers her name, and seems, in remembering who she is, to see her identity as it is: an intertextual construction of multiple models, all interconnected. In this awakening, she begins to view her identity as constructed of a collection of narratives; these narratives always exist in relation to one another, not in isolation. She also seems to begin to understand the thematic import of the models she has chosen, seeing their destructive power more clearly. In order to make sense of all of her accumulated narratives and overcome the instability created by each one, Hermione must rework them, combine them in a new way. Beryl’s mere presence, her look is enough to bring Hermione back to a knowledge of who she is. However, it takes another nearly disastrous childbirth and a series of other events for Hermione to gain control over the
narrative self-fashioning she has been engaged in all along. The key however, is apparent
in the first few pages in which Hermione and Beryl’s first meeting is represented:

Was it saying “Hellas” and not “Greece” that was to save her? […] Hermione was repelled and for the same reason strangely lighted, concentrated, brought to some poignant focus. O this was it. This was to be her undoing again, again, again…she was not to be let drift and merge into the forest, into the cold green […] Morgan le Fay smile your little odd twisted smile for another will replace you. […] Don’t think you can get out of it. Smile and waste your brain…try to waste your brain…you have no brain…where have I put my Greek Anthology? (169)

Although it takes much of the rest of the novel for Hermione to completely let go of the feeling of liberating isolation that Morgan le Fay offers, the process has clearly already begun here. Hermione seems to recognize the inevitability of a new narrative replacing the current model in her continual process of narrative self-fashioning. Morgan le Fay, who has no brain, no intellect, is being displaced by Hermione, who uses the intellectual and poetic word “Hellas” instead of “Greece,” who wants her Greek Anthology again, who remembers that she does have an intellect, and the capacity to create art. As Hermione remembers art and intellect, Morgan le Fay becomes increasingly insufficient, and the instability (the fact that “being” Morgan le Fay makes it impossible for Hermione to create art) she introduces as a model becomes apparent to Hermione. Throughout the rest of Hermione’s pregnancy, she continues to periodically meet with Beryl, beginning with visits at the home of a mutual friend, and then with meetings at Beryl’s home.

When Hermione is back in her cottage, she tends to revert to Morgan le Fay, and there is a nearly constant dialogue between these two forces of Hermione’s personality:

It’s too late now, Morgan le Fay. Don’t try to be too inappropriately feminine. But I must be. I am having a small le Fay. […] If I can do without a husband […] if I can do without a lover […] if I can do without
anybody, I can do without anybody and I want to prove to myself that I am strong and that I am alone like Madonna was. (187)

These internal dialogues recall the conversations between Hermione and Fayne\textsuperscript{20} from the beginning of the novel, implying that Beryl evokes in Hermione the same feelings that Fayne did. Although in the beginning they only discuss poetry and art, Beryl, although much younger than Hermione, is solicitous in the way that a lover or a suitor would be. As the relationship with Beryl develops, Hermione thinks of herself more and more as “Hermione” and less and less as Morgan le Fay. She finds intellectual conversation more natural.\textsuperscript{21}

By the end of the novel, Hermione has begun to create a new home for herself with Beryl, one where she can reconcile her goal of being an artist with her life as a woman. The novel ends with the two women reaching an agreement: Beryl promises to stop trying to kill herself, in exchange for which she can help raise Hermione’s baby. Hermione is assured a home, a partner, and the ability to work as an artist. In this final scene, there is no internal dialogue between Hermione and Morgan le Fay, and we see Hermione take control of the narratives that make up her identity. The arrangement she creates with Beryl draws on all of the previous models, and the lessons Hermione has learned from them, but does not rely entirely on any of them. At the end of the novel, Hermione is able to recognize the destructive power of the models she has identified with throughout the novel, but also recognizes that her identity is inextricably connected to such narratives. The key is that at the end of the novel, Hermione is aware of the constructed nature of her identity and is therefore able to reach a point in her narrative self-fashioning that resolves the global instability of the novel and all of the subsequent
instabilities: Hermione is finally in a position to create art, she is in a stable relationship, and that relationship prevents her from becoming alienated from society.

Hermione’s series of identifications with literary and historical models underscores how any given character stands in intertextual relations with other characters. Moreover, when that character recognizes this intertextual network, it can be either productive for or destructive to the character’s sense of self. Hermione herself recognizes that this process is endless, when she says (to herself), “Morgan le Fay smile your little odd twisted smile for another will replace you” (169). Each of Hermione’s identifications has its own thematic function, and contributes to Hermione’s larger thematic function of demonstrating the difficulty of becoming a successful female artist. At the same time, the emphasis on the synthetic nature of the models Hermione chooses emphasizes the synthetic nature of Hermione as a character, and thus highlights the difficulty of H.D.’s task of constructing a successful female artist character. The novel is self-consciously about the intertextual process of narrative self-fashioning. Rather than propose an end to such self-fashioning, H.D. simply shows that both authors and individuals must be aware of the models they choose and the implications each model necessarily carries with it.

More importantly, H.D. demonstrates that despite the variety of female characters prominent in both popular culture and classical literature, there is actually a paucity of models for successful female characters. Each character Hermione chooses to identify with actually leads to the destruction of Hermione as a female artist. Instead, H.D. suggests that in order for Hermione to be a successful female artist she must re-
contextualize past models by situating them within the larger narrative-in-progress of her own life story; by constructing a narrative about the relationships among these models, Hermione strikes new ground as a female artist in her own right.

“*He Called Her Dear*”

Zelda Fitzgerald’s short story, “Miss Ella” provides a useful counterpoint to H.D.’s *Asphodel*. As I have shown, H.D.’s novel explores the process whereby an exceptional female artist draws on a range of intertextual references in attempts to construct a narrative of her own identity. Fitzgerald’s story more definitively illustrates the impossibility of such a task for an average woman. “Miss Ella” demonstrates the failure of a woman to exert control over the construction of her own narrative; further, Fitzgerald strengthens this social commentary through intertextual relationships with William Faulkner's 1930 short story “*A Rose for Emily*” as well as her own previously published work. Formally, Fitzgerald uses an anecdotal style and overt narrative cues to disguise her argument about women’s powerlessness in society and to encourage readers to interpret the narrative as a simple story with a full resolution.

Fitzgerald published a number of short stories and essays in popular periodicals, most of which were sold and received as lighthearted celebrity writing. The critical assessment of Fitzgerald’s work has largely followed this initial response, due in part to Scott’s resentment of Zelda’s work and the attitude of publishers toward the wife of a famous novelist. Matthew J. Bruccoli, editor of Zelda Fitzgerald’s collected writings, laments, “it is regrettable that the conditions under which she worked prevented her from mastering her craft” (xiii), and notes that the “extant stories have an improvised,
spontaneous quality that may have been intentional” (271). Zelda was acutely aware of this perception of her work, and her literary production was conditioned by the responses she knew it would bring. At the same time, modern feminist critics have drawn attention to Fitzgerald’s sophisticated discussions of aesthetics, which appear most often in her letters to Scott. This recent scholarship reveals a more complex author than has previously been acknowledged, one who wrote lengthy analyses of Aristotle as well as essays, short stories, and novels. So, although Bruccoli questions whether the aesthetic effects of Fitzgerald’s work are intentional, there seems ample evidence to suggest that Fitzgerald was sensitive to issues of aesthetics and narration, as well as questions of narrative authority.

The conflict between the Fitzgeralds over who had the right to use their shared experiences in fiction is well-documented, and explains why Zelda chose to use submerged rather than overt forms of experimentation. Scott felt that, as the professional writer, he had exclusive rights to both of their lives as well as people they knew. Although he invoked his authority as the professional and expert, it seems clear that Zelda’s literary efforts threatened Scott, to the point that he, with the help of Zelda’s doctors, restricted Zelda’s writing activities, both when she was institutionalized and when she was at home. In order to be allowed to write at all, Zelda had to carefully attend to the surface appearance of her work, making it conform to the picture of the amateur author and the dutiful wife of the professional writer.

Fitzgerald’s essays are characterized by a seemingly lighthearted tone and sarcastic wit, but beneath this blithe surface they frequently address serious social issues
and even level stern accusations at society and, sometimes, readers. In one essay, “Friend Husband’s Latest,” Fitzgerald sandwiches an accusation of plagiarism against Scott between witty observations about the usefulness of *The Beautiful and the Damned* and a list of errors and inconsistencies in the text. Fitzgerald draws attention to Scott’s use of her diaries in his fiction, an issue she felt strongly about, but masks her outrage with humor. While many of Fitzgerald’s essays were commissioned as companion pieces to Scott’s work, she also wrote a number of stand-alone pieces, often focusing on the figure of the Flapper in American culture. In these essays, Fitzgerald uses the same lighthearted tone, and, in doing so, veils the pessimistic nature of her observations on women in American society. Responding to a number of articles written about the dangers of the flapper lifestyle, Fitzgerald writes in “Eulogy on the Flapper” that flappers are not those in divorce courts and that, if anything, the lifestyle of the flapper only ensures the young woman’s eventual assimilation into mainstream society. In the model Fitzgerald constructs, women’s subjectivity is a progression, a series of subject positions from traditional to rebellious and back to traditional. In this model, Fitzgerald levels a significant critique of both American morality and the efficacy of the supposed rebellion of the women of her generation. She explains:

> Despite the fact that nine out of ten of them [women] go through life with a deathbed air either of snatchings-the-last-moment or with martyr-resignation, [they] do not die tomorrow – or the next day. They have to live on to any one of many bitter ends, and I should think the sooner they learned that things weren’t going to be over until they were too tired to care, the quicker the divorce court’s popularity would decline. (392)

According to Fitzgerald then, a woman’s lot is the same no matter what course of action she takes. If they are repressed, if they rebel, if they marry, stay single, or choose to
divorce, ultimately women are forced to live on to any number of “bitter ends,” which she later details repeatedly in her fiction, in particular “Miss Ella.” Fitzgerald’s essays on flappers not only focus on the flapper’s ultimate return to conventionality; they also illustrate how little control a woman actually has over the narrative of her life. Whereas H.D. showed Hermione eventually managing to take control over her own narrative, Fitzgerald consistently shows that regardless of the flapper’s attempts to exert agency in her life, her attempts prove futile and end with the woman’s loss of control. Suggesting that even the seeming agency of a divorce is a misguided attempt to achieve the impossible, Fitzgerald claims that women must resign themselves to this lack of control.

“Miss Ella,” then, like any work of literature, cannot be read in isolation, but benefits from being read in the context of Fitzgerald’s other work, both fictional and non-fictional. “Miss Ella” allowed Fitzgerald to explore in a fictional context the claims she had been making in her essays. Published in *Scribner’s Magazine* in December 1931, “Miss Ella” describes a southern spinster and details her early love affairs in an attempt to explain her apparent contentedness with a spinster’s existence. The story begins by describing Miss Ella as an older woman, living alone. She wears the starched white dresses of the Victorian era, has rigid ideas about health and leisure, rejects the romantic advances of a doctor, and follows the same daily routine as her elderly aunt of the same name. The anecdotal tone of the story’s opening ("When I was young I loved Miss Ella"), together with the list of attributes the narrator ascribes to Miss Ella, are the beginning of a smooth mimetic surface – of both progression and character, that keep the
thematic and synthetic functions covert (343). Miss Ella is, most prominently, a convincing possible person.

The narrator offers the story of Miss Ella’s earlier love life as explanation for her current circumstances. This further contributes to the smooth mimetic surface of the story. The impression is of a local resident offering an explanation for a local eccentric, and the progression of the plot seems to be motivated by the actions of individual characters, keeping the synthetic functions covert. The bulk of the story details Miss Ella’s traditional engagement to a young man she only calls formally Mr. Hendrix (the narrator never gives his first name) and her more passionate and unplanned love affair with Andy Bronson. This love affair begins at a church function when Andy sets off a firecracker, which catches Miss Ella’s petticoats on fire. This episode is followed by a gift of roses as an apology, then a series of more meaningful and expensive gifts: yards of Persian silk, ivory beads, his Phi Beta Kappa key, and finally, a star sapphire, after which she allows him to kiss her “far into the pink behind her ears” (347). Miss Ella breaks her engagement with Mr. Hendrix, “hopefully dreading” the scene which never materializes; Mr. Hendrix leaves silently, returning only once afterwards, when “the depression about him made holes in the air, and Miss Ella was glad when he left her free to laugh again” (348). On the day of Ella and Andy’s wedding, Mr. Hendrix kills himself with a shotgun on the steps of the playhouse in Miss Ella’s garden. The narrator says nothing of the wedding being canceled, only that “years passed but Miss Ella had no more hope for love” (348).
Just as the message about women in society is veiled in the flapper essays, Fitzgerald uses a number of techniques in “Miss Ella” to distract casual readers’ attention from her more subversive cultural critiques. As with other instances of submerged experimentation discussed in this dissertation, Fitzgerald is able to craft a narrative that will clue some careful, knowledgeable readers into her aims, while others will fail to pick up on those clues. Attention to the submerged experimentation in Fitzgerald’s short story leads to a greater awareness of the thematic and synthetic elements of the text, and to a more complex mimetic function. Relying on her readers’ knowledge of her other work, Fitzgerald was able to establish an intertextual relationship between “Miss Ella” and her previously published essays and short fiction. In this case, the intertextual cues are found in the apparent similarities between “Miss Ella” and Fitzgerald’s other work. However, these surface similarities conceal more significant differences, which create an intertextual dialogue. The narrative voice bears a strong resemblance to the tone of her other short stories, as does the subject matter; but a careful reader would have noted that both the voice and the thematic content are also significant departures. For example, while “Miss Ella” is a love story, like many of Fitzgerald’s other stories were, it deals with a woman of a previous era, rather than a modern flapper. The use of a first person narrator would also have seemed familiar to regular readers of her published fiction and essays. Fitzgerald frequently used a speaker or a first person narrator that seemed to stand for the author herself. She used this method when responding to Scott’s work, as mentioned above in the discussion of “Friend Husband’s Latest,” as well as in her fiction where the narrator is an “I” or a “we” that clearly refers to Fitzgerald herself or the
Fitzgeralds as a couple. Thus, the use of the first person, with an occasional switch to first person plural, fits with Fitzgerald’s previous work. Fitzgerald’s first person narrator was designed to elicit a specific reading: that of a local color piece or an amusing character sketch. In particular, the narrator’s memories of Miss Ella’s quaint beliefs about health invoke this kind of Victorian spinster-as-curiosity reading.

Although the narrative voice is one of the features of Fitzgerald's text that encourages some readers, particularly those who were unaware of the subversive nature of her other writing, to interpret the story as non-subversive, it is also the feature that most clearly cues readers to look for the submerged aspects of the narrative. Careful readers with knowledge of the Flapper essays and Fitzgerald’s other “girl” stories would recognize that “Miss Ella” is narrated in a particularly problematic first person. The narrative voice switches between first person singular and first person plural – the first person plural refers immediately to the “three romantic children” who snuck into Miss Ella’s garden to play. However, once the narrator moves from the beginning of the story, where he or she describes Miss Ella as she was when the narrator was a child, the information provided makes the effect reminiscent of a communal narration, like that used by William Faulkner in “A Rose for Emily.” In fact, Faulkner’s story was published only a year prior to Fitzgerald’s, during a time when biographers note that she was actively reading and recommending Faulkner’s work. Fitzgerald’s use of analogous shifts in narrative voice establishes an intertextual connection between “Miss Ella” and “A Rose for Emily,” which Fitzgerald uses to heighten her critique of the social structures she had already attacked in her essays.
In “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner uses a true plural first person narrator, representing the perspective of the town as a whole, spanning multiple generations. Fitzgerald achieves the same effect while using a first person singular narrator who blurs the line between hetero- and homodiegetic, since he/she begins by narrating personal experiences with Miss Ella, but then narrates events that must have occurred before the narrator was born. Fitzgerald’s narrator appears at the beginning to be an uncomplicated homodiegetic narrator character, but later develops all the instability of a communal first person narration – which also blurs the line between the notion of a narrator who does or does not participate in the story he or she narrates. In “A Rose for Emily,” likewise, the narrator represents a great number of people, some of whom wooed Miss Emily in the distant past, and some of whom have never even seen her, having grown up after she withdrew into her house. Faulkner’s use of the collective pronoun makes the blurring more evident, because the reader is constantly aware of the strangeness of the narrator’s identity.

Faulkner’s narrator in “A Rose for Emily” is also bound by certain constraints created by the nature of the narrator’s persona. Because the narrative voice (and the focalizing eye) is that of the town looking on while Miss Emily goes about her life, the narration never describes things unless they could have been witnessed by someone from the town. Things witnessed only by Emily or Tobe (who disappears without speaking to anyone) are only guessed at, and gaps are left to be filled in by the reader when the house is finally opened after Miss Emily’s death. Fitzgerald’s narrator lacks the reticence of Faulkner’s, which marks another departure from her usual style. In Fitzgerald’s other
works, the narrator’s source of knowledge is revealed – usually the narrator explicitly names the source: firsthand experience (the narrator witnessed the events), a confidence (the narrator heard the story from those concerned), or gossip. In “Miss Ella,” by contrast, Fitzgerald’s narrator relates intensely private moments between Ella and Andy, and between Ella and Mr. Hendrix, without remarking on how he or she came by this knowledge. Whereas Faulkner’s narrator only provides the town’s guesses about Miss Emily’s state of mind (“we all said, ‘She will kill herself’”), Fitzgerald’s narrator gives detailed accounts of Miss Ella’s internal thoughts and feelings. In short, Fitzgerald’s narrator transgresses the limits of what the reader would reasonably expect him or her to know. Fitzgerald’s narrator approximates the collective voice of a town constructing a narrative around a problematic community member, and Fitzgerald takes her narration further than Faulkner does, illustrating that in her storyworld, much like in the real world, details that are not public knowledge will be provided by the town to create a “complete” picture.

This detail is at once mimetic – it contributes to the feeling of a townspeople explaining a local eccentric - and thematic and synthetic. Once the reader has noticed the mimetic implications of the narrative voice the thematic and synthetic functions of Miss Ella as a character become more prominent. It becomes clear that Fitzgerald is telling a more complex story than it first appeared, and that Miss Ella, in addition to being a compelling possible person, also stands for a number of themes in the text, including narrative authority, agency, and rebellion. Once the reader begins to read Miss Ella thematically, she must also consider her as representative of the spinster in general.
One of the most interesting, and perhaps most obvious things about the narrator of “Miss Ella” is that, while the narrator is first person, the narrator is not Miss Ella. This fact, while obvious, points to the issue of narrative authority at stake in this text. It is important to consider not only how Miss Ella’s story is told, but also who gets to tell it. Miss Ella is not invested with the authority to tell her own story; the story is not even a secondhand account of Ella’s story as she tells it. One of the key issues raised by the text is the way those with firsthand knowledge are not automatically granted the authority to transmit that knowledge. Instead, the one person who knows the whole story is almost never allowed to speak. Thus the narrative voice, one of the key factors in the smooth mimetic surface of the story, has a strong thematic component once the submerged experimentation is recognized. Because Miss Ella is never allowed to speak, she cannot fashion herself in the sense that Hermione does by re-constructing a narrative from character models. Here, the first-person narrator pre-empts Miss Ella, constructing her character for her and denying her artistic agency in telling her own story.

Since she has no agency in the telling of the story, it seems on the surface that Miss Ella is entirely without agency. Yet this seemingly inconsequential character, who does not participate significantly in her society, who seems to purposefully separate herself from her community, is in fact a powerful figure in that community. Although on the surface we can discount “Miss Ella” as an anecdotal piece and Miss Ella herself as a marginal figure with no authority and therefore no power, the story Fitzgerald sets out to tell about Miss Ella is in fact much more complex, much more akin to Fitzgerald’s own constant negotiations of authority and identity than to the experiences of the simplistic
Victorian spinster that Miss Ella initially appears to be. Under the surface, Miss Ella is a complex figure, which is why her community feels it is necessary to construct a narrative around her.

Miss Ella’s story, when one looks closer, is not all that different from the rebellions Fitzgerald describes in her Flapper essays. Miss Ella experiences a conventional romance and courtship with Mr. Hendrix, and then begins her rebellion by accepting Andy Bronson’s gifts and encouraging his attentions. Her role in the courtship with Mr. Hendrix is not clear, but she does make an irrevocable decision in ending her engagement with him. Ella abandons Mr. Hendrix’s staid attentions and passive dignity for Andy’s overt sexuality and his sensuous and luxurious gifts. The first encounter between Ella and Andy is described in clearly sexual terms, with Ella just barely conscious of Andy until a firework he sets off catches her petticoats on fire: while the rest of the crowd is “laughing, disapproving, explaining, not knowing what had happened, Andy was the first to reach her burning skirts” (347). Andy and his gifts awaken a passion that Ella did not have for Mr. Hendrix; instead of being formally in love, Ella “loved [Andy] with a desperate suppression” (347). With this sexual awakening, Ella begins to function thematically as an example of what happens to women who act on sexual desire.

This is clearly a period of rebellion and agency for Miss Ella. During her courtship with Mr. Hendrix, Ella is passive: “he told her how things were to be, and she acquiesced;” however, Mr. Hendrix’s departure “left her free to laugh again” (346). The marriage with Mr. Hendrix was to take place in the church, whereas Ella’s marriage to
Andy Bronson is set to occur in her house. Their marriage in the house instead of the local church signals a departure from the institutions that bound Miss Ella in her relationship with Mr. Hendrix. More generally, Ella’s relationship with Andy is free of many of the constraints and institutions she was subject to while being engaged to Mr. Hendrix. Ella’s plans for her marriage to Mr. Hendrix are described in terms of compromise and negotiation with those institutions: “they planned to […] barter with God at the altar; toil and amiability for emotional sanctity” (347). There is no such negotiation in Ella’s relationship with Andy. In addition, although the interactions between Ella and Andy that the narrator represents to the reader are limited, there is a marked difference between their romance and Ella’s relationship with Mr. Hendrix. Mr. Hendrix is described as dictating the future to Ella: “he told her how things were to be, and she acquiesced” (346). In the interactions between Ella and Andy that are rendered in the narrative, neither dictates to the other. For the most part, Andy presents Ella with gifts and then waits for her to respond. Even hiding the star sapphire in a chamois bag around her neck is a sign of Ella’s agency; she has chosen to accept this token, and by doing so sends a clear signal to Andy (while actively concealing it from Mr. Hendrix).

This moment marks Ella’s real assumption of agency in the text. She has control over two men, and is able to make choices about her future by choosing between two options, one representing tradition and stability and the other representing personal agency. At this stage in the narrative, Ella is creating her own story and her own identity instead of having it dictated to her. However, this period of agency is brief, and is
ultimately contained by Mr. Hendrix’s suicide and the narrator’s subsequent retelling of Miss Ella’s story.

Given the thematic function Ella has assumed by this point in the text, it is clear that Fitzgerald’s view of female agency is ultimately a profoundly pessimistic one. Miss Ella’s rebellion – her attempt to construct her own narrative of self – is contained by the violence of Mr. Hendrix’s suicide. Even if Ella made a conscious choice to forego her marriage and become a spinster, the narrator does not recount that agency, effectively erasing it from the “official” narrative constructed around Ella. The formal construction of “Miss Ella,” a title that keeps the town’s relationship to Ella formal, and at the same time binds her to her younger, single self, rigidly defines Ella according to how the town has narrated her. Just as Fitzgerald uses a less stable, more problematic narrative voice than that used in Faulkner’s story, she also renders a far more pessimistic view than even Faulkner’s story – often referred to as a type of horror story. In “A Rose for Emily,” Emily ultimately has a (very circumscribed) life that the town cannot touch. What goes on inside her house is ultimately under her control, as evidenced by the grisly revelation after her death. In “Miss Ella,” even the private events that occur inside Miss Ella’s house are narrated, and therefore controlled, by the town. If the narrative drive of the town is only escapable through murder in “A Rose for Emily,” it is utterly inescapable in “Miss Ella.” By extension, because Miss Ella functions thematically as a representative of women who act on sexual desire, and women who attempt to gain agency, female agency in general is brought into question. Miss Ella becomes representative of woman’s fate, regardless of her attempts at rebellion or escape.
Conclusion

Both *Asphodel* and “Miss Ella” situate their female protagonists within a network of intertexts, exploring the extent to which they have agency in contexts of narrative self-fashioning. The network of intertexts employed by each author also serves to highlight the synthetic function of each main character, allowing both authors to reflect on the process of creating a female character at the synthetic level. For H.D., intertextuality is woven into the storyworld, in that *Asphodel* employs a series of intertexts to illustrate the paucity of positive models for female characters, particularly female artist characters. In contrast, rather than thematizing intertextuality, Fitzgerald’s entire story is situated intertextually within her larger oeuvre, and, very specifically in relation to Faulkner’s short story, in order to highlight the constraints society and narrative place upon female character. H.D., the highbrow author, produces a text that is relatively optimistic about the possibility of a female character *if* the character takes control over the construction of her own narrative and does not submit uncritically to past models, while Fitzgerald, the middlebrow author, is quite pessimistic about a female character’s ability to control her own narrative, as well as about the narrative possibilities for female characters in general.

Precisely because both narratives share a level of self-reflexivity, their respective optimism and pessimism might well be influenced by the external realities of each author’s life. By the time *Asphodel* was composed, H.D. had achieved a stable life with her partner, Bryher; they were raising H.D.’s daughter. When Fitzgerald composed “Miss Ella,” she had been in and out of sanitariums for at least a year, often institutionalized against her will. Ultimately, then, *Asphodel* and “Miss Ella” suggest the
relevance of a final level of intertextuality in which the author’s lived experiences help shape their sense of the possibilities for female characters--and the female artist--in the twentieth century.


2 Interestingly, when feminist theorists discuss character, they rarely use the term “character.” It is more common to see discussions of subjectivity (though this is not always the way the term subjectivity is used). Yet the emphasis in feminist theory on (gendered) subjectivity closely aligns their discussions with narrative theorists who discuss the notion of character as a “possible person in a possible world.”

3 HERmione covers an earlier period in H.D.’s life, including her engagement to George Lowndes (Ezra Pound) and the beginning of her relationship with Fayne Rabb (Frances Gregg).

4 Until 1992, scholars, including Susan Stanford Friedman, worked from the manuscript housed at Beinecke Library, Yale University. H.D. had famously written “destroy” on the cover page of the manuscript, as she felt that Asphodel was in many ways an early draft of Madrigal, which she considered the most complete iteration of her autobiography. Robert Spoo traces the complexities of H.D.’s revisions in his introduction to the text (x-xi).

5 The New York Times notes that the novel is “still likely to be of interest mainly to scholars,” and that while Spoo “calls H.D.’s dialogue ‘expressively congested’; impatient readers are apt to be less polite” (Becker BR46). An advertisement, also in The New York Times, by Duke University Press, describes the text (in the words of Susan Stanford Friedman) as “a brilliant experimentalist text important to the history and theory of both modernist and women’s writing” (qtd. in New York Times, BR41). Both clearly frame the text as difficult and esoteric, primarily of interest to scholars and academics.

6 In addition, Hermione’s subversive artistic goals are linked to subversive forms of sexuality. In fact, the treatment of Hermione’s sexuality, and H.D.’s manipulation of and reflections upon the character of the female artist are discussed together in sections of uncharacteristically clear prose, drawing the reader’s attention to these issues by virtue of their comparative clarity. Elsewhere in the novel, when Fayne accuses Hermione of trying to conceal their relationship, Hermione insists that it is not their
relationship, but her desire to write that requires concealment: “We don’t need to be screened. What have we done or could we do to need any apology or explanation? I am burning away that’s all. The clear gem-like flame. I don’t want you to miss it. I’m going to write, work. You could” (52). The implication is that, while a sexual relationship between two women would not cause a problem for them, Hermione’s artistic goals would be unseemly, unsuitable, and inappropriate. Thus, the novel positions sexual identity as parallel to women’s artistic identity, but establishes artistic identity as more problematic for Hermione as a character.

7 In the classic study of women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar address Harold Bloom’s famous concept of the male artist’s anxiety of influence. In Bloom’s argument, male writers must engage in an Oedipal struggle with their literary predecessors in order to establish their own place in the literary world. Gilbert and Gubar argue that, due to female writers’ lack of predecessors, they suffer instead from an “anxiety of authorship,” and seek to uncover models for themselves rather than battle against the women who came before. As Ann W. Astell has rightly pointed out, in her book *Joan of Arc and Sacrificial Authorship*, what Gilbert and Gubar overlook is the simultaneous existence of anxiety of authorship and anxiety of influence. The anxiety of influence experienced by women remains remarkably similar to what Bloom describes in relation to men. According to Astell, female authors look to figures like Joan of Arc in order to find both a mirror image of their own struggles as authors, and also to then enact the sacrifice of that figure in their fiction. Just as the male author in Bloom’s model goes through stages of identification, opposition, and appropriation of the predecessor, the female writer must both uncover and recover her predecessor as well as confront and then destroy or appropriate the predecessor. Thus, the female author has both identified a legitimate past and eliminated it in order to necessitate her own existence as an artist and to solidify her own career.

8 Susan Stanford Friedman interprets this as a comment on Hermione’s (and presumably Joan’s) lesbianism: “Joan of Arc had been for H.D. a symbol of female difference and defiance associated with lesbianism in her earlier novel *Asphodel*” (*Penelope’s Web* 14). I interpret this statement as connected to the statements about visions that immediately follow it, and more broadly construed “masculine” activities.

9 Joan of Arc was frequently invoked in the women’s suffrage movement as a symbol of women’s potential power and their equality with men. These images were then appropriated in British propaganda during the First World War, making Joan a symbol of women’s obligation to their country. Joan was also officially canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church in 1920, following her beatification in 1909. Joan was present in a variety of forms in the public consciousness, and remained an overdetermined figure throughout the 20th century. Most popular representations of Joan emphasize her
military strength and gender bending; she is almost always represented in her armor, bearing a sword. In Asphodel Joan’s armor is hardly ever mentioned, and when it is, it tends to be conflated with the humiliation and death of Joan, which is further conflated with that of Christ: “This classic thing, this action daring the soldiers, rough treatment, no kindness, daring to be herself, like Athene, like Artemis. […] White lilies for your and for Jeanne d’Arc fleur de lys. Of course. Fleur de lys. […] They insulted you. But who, who did? They put a crimson robe and a reed, no a sword and they dragged your armour from you. You died defenceless in a white robe. No in no robe. They parted His garments…and the soldiers laughed but it wasn’t they that slew you” (11). Hermione only thinks of Joan’s armor when she imagines it being torn from her.

Throughout H.D.’s oeuvre, she imagined artists in a variety of ways, but one recurrent theme was that of the artist as conduit, or visionary with a connection to some source of knowledge or enlightenment. In Notes on Thought and Vision, H.D. describes artists' minds (and the ideal appreciators’ as well) as “receiving centres,” which are specially equipped to be acted upon by the world (or, in the case of appreciators, existing works of art): “two or three people, with healthy bodies and the right sort of receiving brains, could turn the whole tide of human thought, could direct lightning flashes of electric power to slash across and destroy the world of dead, murky thought” (26,7).

A series of other factors also contribute to Hermione’s sense of crisis: Fayne Rabb returns to Europe, surprising Hermione with the revelation that she is married; Hermione renews her relationship with George Lowndes, only to realize that he is actually married to someone else, and finally, Shirley Thornton kills herself.

“But there was one thing to hang on to. These letters that she had swept up from the hall table, the letters that she had picked up from the flood slipped under the door, the letters that she was taking so for granted […] became by some turn of events, something super-natural, sub-normal, something that must spell escape, regeneration, beatitude. For wasn’t that just what separated them, separated her now from this slightly ageing (poor darling she was only thirty but Hermione was taut with her youth’s arrogance) Shirley? Wasn’t it just that separated Shirley from Hermione?” (94). This passage is also fascinating in that it offers one of the only moments of an outside voice, presumably that of the narrator, who has been virtually silent throughout, overwhelmed by Hermione’s own mind style.

Interestingly, the “modern” narratives are not represented as any more liberating than the traditional ones. Hermione feels just as trapped and betrayed when she attempts to be the “modern wife” who disregards her husband’s infidelity as she does when she tries to be the old-fashioned wife.
Hermione reflects on this judgment, unique to a female artist: “You can’t say this, this…but men will say O she was a coward, a woman who refused her womanhood. No, she hadn’t. But take a man with a flaming mind and ask him to do this. Ask him to sit in a dark cellar and no books…but you musn’t. You can’t. Women can’t speak and clever women don’t have children. So if a clever woman does speak, she must be mad. She is mad. She wouldn’t have had a baby, if she hadn’t been” (113).

In *Penelope’s Web*, Friedman provides an extended analysis of pregnancy in *Asphodel*. Friedman sees two seemingly contradictory representations of pregnancy in *Asphodel*: “first, H.D. paralleled war and pregnancy as public and private versions of an underlying patriarchal structure. Second, she proposed women’s procreative power as a counterweight to men’s violence, as a regenerative force in the (re)birth of both individual and society. Ultimately, these contradictory perspectives on procreation complement each other by showing how war externalizes sexual politics, how women as the repressed of history return again and again to participate in and disrupt its (re)production” (184,5). I find this reading of pregnancy in *Asphodel* compelling; however, I think Friedman overlooks the role of pregnancy in the novel as a künstlerroman – she considers it as representative of a type of procreative power, but I believe H.D. sees pregnancy and the conditions surrounding the pregnant woman as central to Hermione’s artistic development.

Penelope also carries with her the more subversive thematic dimension of a female artist who uses her art to subvert the machinations of men. Friedman’s *Penelope’s Web* explores this concept in H.D.’s entire oeuvre, to productive ends. In this instance, however, I think Hermione as a character clearly identifies herself as incapable of playing that role – in her world she is unable to be the wife and use art as a tool.

The narrative(s) surrounding Morgan le Fay associate her with a separate sphere of existence and with a great deal of power and authority.

Kevin J. Harty discusses one such film, the Italian *Tristano e Isotta*, made in 1911. In this film, Morgan le Fay appears magically to rescue the lovers from a poison.

By embracing this new model, Hermione is allowing herself to become unbalanced according to H.D.’s conception of artistic balance, which required the intellect and the body to be in proportion to one another. This imbalance is addressed in *Notes on Thought and Vision*, where H.D. explains that the “aim of men and women of highest development is equilibrium, balance, growth of the three [manifestations of life] at once; brain without physical strength is a manifestations of weakness, a disease comparable to cancerous growth or tumor; body without reasonable amount of intellect is an empty fibrous bundle of glands as ugly and little to be desired as body of a victim of some form of elephantiasis or fatty-degeneracy; over-mind without the balance of
the other two is madness and a person so developed should have as much respect as a reasonable maniac and no more” (17).

20 There is also an obvious visual similarity and assonantal rhyme between the names Fayne and Fay, which helps focus attention on the opposition between Hermione and her alter ego, as well as recall the earlier romantic relationship with Fayne.

21 As with the rest of the novel, a series of crises or shocks is necessary to really complete her transition to the final stage of her development. First, she contracts influenza, despite her isolation and distance from London, demonstrating that isolation cannot protect her from the dangers of the outside world, and, by extension, of society. When she recovers, Darrington has miraculously returned, seemingly transformed into pre-war Darrington. They share a brief interlude of happiness before and immediately after the baby is born. Then, with no explanation, Darrington changes his mind, and says that he cannot live with Hermione, cannot claim the baby as his own (as he promised to do throughout her pregnancy), and threatens her with penal servitude if she registers the baby under his name. Darrington leaves her for Louise, one of the women he had an affair with during the war, and says he will use the child’s registration (with Vane’s name) as evidence for a divorce. This final crisis, which is resolved quickly (a wealthy and influential friend tells Hermione that “no judge in England would condemn her,”” and Hermione flees to Beryl for shelter and support), signals the abandonment of Morgan le Fay as a model for Hermione (202).


24 Thus, my discussion of intertextuality in Fitzgerald’s work focuses both on her references to her own work and to the work of others, whereas my discussion of H.D.’s work focuses primarily on her references to outside texts. However, Asphodel also contains rich intertextual references to H.D.’s own prose and poetic oeuvre. Although H.D.’s novel contains many references to her own work, I have chosen to focus on the historical intertextuality that is essential to her construction of a concept of narrative self-fashioning.


26 The only actual utterances reported as coming from Miss Ella are: “she said she tended the garden” (which is immediately negated by the narrator, “but it was really Time and a Negro contemporary of his who did that”), “she never called him anything but Mr. Hendrix,” “He said that there would be beauty and peace forever after and she
said “Yes,” and finally, she tells Mr. Hendrix about Andy Bronson, but her exact words are not related.

This argument is indebted to Judith Fetterley’s discussion of “A Rose for Emily” in her essay “A Rose for ‘A Rose for Emily,’” where she argues that the consistent use of “Miss Emily” throughout the story indicates the town’s alienation of Emily (they keep their relationship with her formal and distant) and their infantilization of her (through their refusal to refer to her by her last name, which would have been traditional for an elderly unmarried woman). By Fetterley’s standards then, even Fitzgerald’s title is pessimistic. If Faulkner grants his protagonist humanity and intimacy in his title, Fitzgerald denies Ella that in hers.
Chapter 4

The Tested Woman Plot in Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* and Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding*

This chapter will examine how Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* and Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding* employ what Lois E. Bueler has called “the tested woman plot” in distinctly modernist ways. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton revises her traditional tested woman plot from *The House of Mirth* to reflect a highbrow modernist sensibility, substituting a feminized male protagonist for the traditional woman figure and giving the tested woman more control over the story’s outcome. I contrast Wharton's emplotment strategies with Holtby’s more covert experimentation in *South Riding*, where she uses submerged experimentation to transform the traditional tested woman plot of an iconic romance into a plot of social activism and change. Taken together, these two novels demonstrate how both highbrow and middlebrow modernist works manipulated conventional plot structures, in particular the “tested woman plot,” by changing the gender of key characters and drawing on intertextual relationships to shape reader expectations.
I began my discussion of character in Chapter 3 with an account of the debates surrounding the concept of "character" in narrative theory. The concept of plot is similarly contentious. Plot remains a subject of controversy precisely because of the contradictory nature of the various theories that seek to define it. I will forgo an extensive survey of what Hilary Dannenberg calls the “terminological thicket” surrounding plot (6), instead drawing on Dannenberg's own overview, as well as that of H. Porter Abbott, to explain how I will use the term in this chapter.

First, as Dannenberg states, “if many theories of plot have one thing in common, it is that they see plot as something more complex than story” (6). Story is generally agreed to be a series of events that always proceeds forward in time; thus, while the events that make up a story can be narrated out of order, the story itself is always chronological. Beyond this consensus (and story itself has other attributes that are subject to debate), issues of narration (which I considered at length in Chapter 2) and plot are more controversial. H. Porter Abbott has usefully divided approaches to plot into three major categories: 1) plot as a type of story, 2) plot as the “artful construction of story,” and 3) plot as the “artful disclosure of story” (43). Although I agree with Abbott’s claim that “each of these three uses of the term plot can be seen as different perspectives on the same overarching issue of the distribution of narrative parts” (44), for the purposes of my argument here, I focus on the first way of understanding plot: plot viewed as a type of story. This usage, according to Abbott, is the most common. It is indebted to the work of Vladimir Propp, Northrop Frye, and Joseph Campbell.¹ Along similar lines,
Dannenberg suggests that “feminist analysis of narrative has isolated different plot types arising out of the stereotypical allocation and limitation of roles due to a protagonist’s gender” (7).

Thus, in focusing on plot as a type of story, I am following feminist critics like Ruth E. Page, Nancy K. Miller, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lois E. Bueler, and Dannenberg herself, who have investigated the ways in which women’s stories and female characters are plotted. My work in this chapter will be particularly indebted to Lois E. Bueler’s *The Tested Woman Plot: Women’s Choices, Men’s Judgments, and the Shaping of Stories*, which examines the “tested woman plot” as “one of the great story machines of all time” (1). Before providing a detailed description of what she means by the “tested woman plot,” Bueler considers the reasons for the continuing unpopularity of criticism of specific plot structures. Her first explanation, though perhaps made offhandedly, is possibly the most convincing: namely, “that the plot is the feature of narrative most interesting to literally naïve readers, from whom literary critics are often eager to distance themselves” (1). But Bueler also suggests that

the absence of critical attention may reflect the complexity of mature plot structures. Not only are they intricately patterned from an interlocking, richly motivated, and staggeringly large set of components, they are found in certain cultural habitats and do specific kinds of ideological work. Thus a critic interested in plot type must have not just an insatiable appetite for stories but an interest in the study of cultures. (1)

This is also, perhaps, the reason why this approach finds itself so at home within my larger argument, which is concerned with the ideological work that various narrative
structures do, as well as the cultural habitats in which they originate, and to which they migrate.

In Bueler’s model of the tested woman plot, the story must have “specific kinds of characters, a stable event structure, and a particular ideological relationship to its cultural habitat” (2). More specifically, she sees the tested woman plot as made up of “three elements: a moral test, a double-stage plot action, and a specific configuration of character functions” (11). The moral test centers on a woman who is faced with a moral choice. Bueler connects this choice scenario to the concept that women’s virtue and chastity must be tested in order to be proven. According to Bueler, “whatever the occasion, the issue underlying the test is obedience to conflicted patriarchal authority, and the tested woman plot moves toward resolution of conflicts and contradictions” (13). The first requirement, then, is thematic: the choice the woman is presented with must be a moral one, and “the story must treat the character’s action as the expression of a deliberate moral position” (12).

The second requirement, what Bueler calls the “double-stage plot action,” involves two distinct stages of the action: the first is the test, or “the point at which the woman chooses or refuses an act of clear moral significance,” and the second is the trial, during which the woman’s actions are judged by some representative of authority. Much of the tension and dramatic effect of the tested woman plot comes from the tension between what “actually happens” and how events are represented in the trial stage. The trial stage need not be fair or unbiased, because it “involves appearance and opinion and
hinges on the behavior of others” (13). One of Bueler’s examples is Pamela, where Mr. B, Pamela’s captor and would-be rapist, is also the authority who repeatedly presides over her trials.

The final element of the tested woman plot, according to Bueler, is “the distribution of agency among male authority functions” (14). These functions include tempter, accuser, defender, and judge. Bueler is careful to distinguish “function” from “character”; a single character can fulfill more than one function: “the four plot functions may be divided up among four characters, or they may be doubled up, so that one character exercises more than one function, even plays them all” (14). Bueler further specifies that there must be conflict (and competition for control of the woman) among the male authority figures, and that resolving that conflict, rather than establishing the woman’s virtue, is the actual aim of the tested woman plot. Jane Eyre, which I will discuss in more detail below, offers a good illustration of Bueler’s model. Jane’s test consists of Rochester, functioning as tempter, trying to persuade Jane to stay with him as his mistress. Jane understands the choice as a moral one and passes the test when she refuses and flees Thornfield. Jane later submits her actions to her cousins for judgment, functioning as her own accuser, and is pronounced innocent.

My analysis of Wharton’s and Holtby’s novels uses Bueler’s descriptive model of the tested woman plot as its entry point, but it diverges from her argument in key ways. Bueler’s model, with its focus on a repeated pattern of events, characters, and character functions, is an abstract template; the effectiveness of novels that incorporate the plot
depends on many other variables, including marked departures from the template and intertextual relations. My project is concerned with how Wharton and Holtby make use of the plot type Bueler describes through just these sorts of departures and intertextual relationships.

Bueler claims that the tested woman plot appears as early as the Hebrew Bible and carries into modern times, although she sees the plot as having lost much of its power and drama by the nineteenth century. This is another instance where I depart from Bueler’s argument; I find the tested woman plot alive and well in modernist fiction. In fact, I argue that both highbrow and middlebrow authors made use of their readers’ familiarity with the tested woman plot in order to manipulate readers’ expectations and transgress the bounds of gendered plot types.

In addition, in exploring the status of the tested woman plot in middlebrow and highbrow modernism, I depart from Bueler’s focus on linking character functions to a stable system of patriarchal authority. While I acknowledge patriarchy as a powerful force in the culture that produced the texts discussed here, I don’t limit my focus to concrete, literal patriarchs in the way Bueler does. In other words, whereas Bueler tends to examine texts that feature a struggle between the rights of the father and the rights of the husband, examining how the plot seeks to resolve the conflict between these male figures, I explore broader manifestations of authority and control, including instances where women themselves function as powerful agents of patriarchal and social control.

*Wharton's Tested Man*
Edith Wharton’s position in the literary landscape of the early twentieth century was somewhat unusual. She was widely acknowledged as a great literary figure, and yet she was also considered something of a holdover from a previous era; reviews of her work were consistently positive, but she was rarely explicitly grouped with the highbrow modernists that I’ve discussed in earlier chapters. Yet she was considered to be quite separate from the “slightly soiled middles,” and clearly deemed highbrow, even if she wasn’t precisely of the “new school” that critics associated with writers like Woolf, Joyce, and Stein. As early as 1899, when *The Greater Inclination* was published, the *New York Times* declared Wharton’s work to be “the cream of modernity” and found its style to be “lightness and grace itself,” although the reviewer finds fault with the subject matter.² The publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905 solidified Wharton’s reputation as one of America’s leading novelists. A reviewer writing in the *New York Observer and Chronicle* opens a review of *The House of Mirth* with the statement, “it will hardly be questioned that Mrs. Edith Wharton’s are the most finished products in American fiction to-day. She is pastmistress [sic] of language and of the novelist’s art in every way” (“Fiction”). Louise Collier Wilcox, writing in *Outlook*, goes so far as to remove the qualifier “American,” when she claims that *The House of Mirth* “sets Mrs. Wharton among the novelists whose work must be counted into the sum of English literature” (719). By the time Wharton published *The Age of Innocence* in 1920, she was established in the minds of critics and readers as a producer of high art.
Further, contemporary critics and readers of Wharton recognized the techniques of modernist fiction in her work. William Lyon Phelps, writing in the *New York Times*, describes Wharton’s career as a “progression from the external to the internal,” recognizing the psychological component of her work (BRM1). However, Phelps also takes pains to separate Wharton from psychological realism in terms that echo the “more real than realism” goals of the high modernists: “it is curious how much more real [the love scenes] are than the unrestrained detailed descriptions thought by so many writers to be ‘realism’” (BRM1). In 1924, when reviewing Wharton’s *A Son at the Front*, Edmund Wilson, writing for *The Dial*, laments that “Mrs. Wharton may never do another really important book for the reason that she has come to accept life, whereas the strength of her earlier work lay in the violence of her reaction against it” (277). Wilson clarifies what he means by “earlier work” by referring to *The Age of Innocence* as, “the suffocation of an intelligent and imaginative man” (277). Wilson’s review clearly links Wharton’s early work (*The Age of Innocence* in particular) to similar highbrow reactions against society and the conventions that suffocate men like Newland Archer. Wharton’s status as highbrow is brought into clearer focus by Edith Thornton’s argument in “‘Innocence’ Consumed: Packaging Edith Wharton with Kathleen Norris in *Pictorial Review* Magazine, 1920-21.” *The Age of Innocence* was first published in serial form in the *Pictorial Review*, with its final installments being published alongside installments of a novel by Kathleen Norris, a popular romance novelist of the day. In this article, Thornton argues that the editors and art directors recognized Wharton’s highbrow status, and
worked to make her more accessible to their readers, who would have been more familiar and comfortable with Norris’s work. These efforts were necessary precisely because of Wharton’s highbrow status, established even before *The Age of Innocence* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Wharton is a particularly interesting case study for my project precisely because of her liminal status – not liminal in terms of highbrow/middlebrow, but rather liminal in terms of her “generation.” As Elizabeth Ammons notes, Wharton’s work is difficult to place in “the current, rather skewed literary demography,” because “she did not publish in the mid nineteenth century or begin her work in the 1920s” (393). She learned her craft with Henry James as a mentor, friend, and influence, but continued to write and publish well into the twentieth century. However, modern scholarship and major anthologies continue to situate Wharton in relation to novelists such as Henry James, rather than the group of novelists associated with literary modernism. In a 2000 edition of *The Age of Innocence*, critics consistently comment on the postwar composition of the novel, as well as Wharton’s awareness of and even participation in key events in the modernist movement (for example, she attended the debut of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*). However, even after acknowledging Wharton’s immersion in the modernist movement, the commentators tend to analyze *The Age of Innocence* either in isolation from its cultural context or as more closely aligned with James’ brand of psychological realism.\(^3\)
My discussion of Wharton’s novels takes into account her awareness of and interaction with highbrow literary modernism. I examine how Wharton's use of the tested woman plot in novels separated by decades – *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* – produced very different effects. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton used a traditional iteration of the tested woman plot, but in *The Age of Innocence*, published fifteen years later in the aftermath of the Great War, she reshaped and remodeled the tested woman plot in order to craft a distinctly modernist critique of society.4

*Lily Bart as Tested Woman*

Beginning with Walter Berry, who first read it in manuscript, critics have often considered *The Age of Innocence* a nostalgic look back at a bygone era (Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 369). More specifically, critics such as Louis Auchincloss position *The Age of Innocence* as a response to, or an apology for, *The House of Mirth* (qtd. in Niall). While critics like Brenda Niall have questioned the validity of this assessment, the relationship between the plots of the two novels has yet to be examined in detail. Wharton herself claimed (in retrospect) that she wrote *The Age of Innocence* in a kind of fit of nostalgia, as she relived the era of her childhood (Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 369). However, the tone of the novel is undoubtedly critical, rather than one of fond remembrance. Thus, though the narrative voice is closely aligned with Archer's vantage point, the narrator also renders judgments, frequently ironic, about the quality of Archer’s character, understanding, and feelings, as well as the world around him.
In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton uses the tested woman plot in a fairly traditional way (though with some innovations). Lily Bart is the tested woman. She faces a series of temptations or trials, each of which she clearly recognizes as having significant moral implications. Wharton complicates this plot, however, by making Lily uncertain about the exact nature of the moral component of her various trials. At the beginning of the novel she views the process of finding a husband with a somewhat jaded eye (jaded by time and experience), but initially she does not view the marriage transaction with the repugnance that, as the novel progresses, she comes to feel toward her prospective unions. Much of this repugnance has to do with the nature of her marriage prospects as she grows older and her reputation becomes more imperiled; however, Lawrence Selden’s opinions of Lily’s actions also become an increasingly powerful influence on how she views her activities on the marriage market. By the end of the novel, the dual quality of the test plot in *The House of Mirth* places Lily in an impossible situation – one with no clear moral ground. Lily, and arguably the reader as well, view each near-engagement with increasing dismay. The series of compromises Lily would have to make in order to marry Rosedale (in addition to those she has already made over the course of her descent into poverty and ill-repute) are precisely those that her intimacy with Selden have led her to despise, and the reader is encouraged to agree with Lily’s assessment, even if the lateness of her realization makes it unavoidably tragic. In fact, it is Rosedale himself who reinforces Selden’s interpretation of Lily’s social machinations.
In their final meeting, when Rosedale makes it clear that he will still marry her if she uses the letters to blackmail Bertha Dorset, Lily sees that her unexplained scruples and resistances had the same attraction as the delicacy of feature, the fastidiousness of manner, which gave her an external rarity, an air of being impossible to match. As he advanced in social experience this uniqueness had acquired a greater value for him, as though he were a collector who had learned to distinguish minor differences of design and quality in some long-coveted object. (280)

Lily’s associations with ever less reputable members of the upper class are the most obvious manifestations of the “ambition” that Selden finds so unworthy of her at the beginning of the novel. Like Rosedale, he recognizes something unique in Lily, which makes him think her marital ambitions unworthy of her, despite their being “quite worthy of most of the people who live by them” (84). The repetition of this view of Lily as unique and somehow superior to her sordid surroundings from such disparate voices (Selden’s and Rosedale’s assessments of Lily’s uniqueness are echoed by other characters throughout the novel) encourages readers to accept it as an objective fact, rather than as a subjective viewpoint held by one character. Thus, the double standard is, in large part, the result of the reader’s agreement with Selden – marriage for money is acceptable for some, but not for Lily Bart.

The tested woman plot has an interesting double quality in The House of Mirth. Lily is simultaneously tempted away from her aim of securing a wealthy husband, and tempted to abandon her seemingly innate sense of “form” (as it would be called in The Age of Innocence) in her mercenary pursuit of that wealthy husband. The reader’s response to the text is similarly double. Since Lily is a sympathetic protagonist, the reader
is encouraged to hope Lily will be successful in her attempts to marry and to view her
distractions with Selden as unfortunate – as instances of Lily succumbing to temptation.\(^5\)
At the same time, the reader is encouraged to adopt Selden’s critical view of Lily’s
pursuit of wealth and position and to hope that she eventually marries for love. As a
result, Lily’s decision to reject Selden for her wealthy suitors is also viewed as a failure
in the face of temptation. Thus, she fails both tests. Because of the double testing
structure, there is also a double trial structure in place here. Selden serves most
prominently as judge in one series of trials, repeatedly condemning Lily for failing to
renounce the temptations of wealth and prestige in favor of his “republic of the spirit”
(81).

At the same time, Wharton encourages readers to see the necessity of Lily’s
pursuit of a wealthy husband. The narrative makes it clear that while she has a great deal
of potential, Lily’s upbringing and training have prepared her for only one thing: being a
beautiful addition to rich, fashionable society. Lily requires external support in order to
survive in New York society, and so each distraction from the goal of obtaining a wealthy
husband is an additional temptation in the tested woman plot. Thus, in the beginning of
the novel, it seems to be a weakness of character when Lily gives in to the temptation of a
walk with Selden when she should be focusing on securing her engagement to Percy
Gryce. Even though Lily might be tempted from her goal by a more romantic or lofty
ideal (love, the freedom of the spirit, etc), from this point of view, gaining a husband is
the ultimate ideal. The impossibility of Lily’s moral position is reinforced by the fact that
each time Lily gives in to distraction and fails in her attempts to charm a new man, she makes herself vulnerable. After failing to win over Percy Gryce, Lily unwittingly places herself in the power of Gus Trenor, and the cycle of giving in to temptation followed by social and moral peril continues throughout the novel. In this context, Lily is judged by various social betters, the first of whom is Judy Trenor, who scolds her for an hour after Lily’s walk with Selden causes her to drive Percy away. Interestingly, in the world of The House of Mirth, judging is often performed by women, rather than men—in contrast with Bueler's model. Likewise, though The Age of Innocence revises many aspects of the tested woman plot from The House of Mirth, the latter also keeps women in the judging role. In Wharton’s critiques of society, women are often the most powerful representatives of social control. In The House of Mirth, the fact that women take this powerful role reinforces Wharton’s critique: society creates a cruel double-bind for women like Lily, and it is women who most powerfully enforce that double-bind. In the end, the novel places Lily in a situation with no good moral choices – the only possible outcomes of her tests are negative.

The Age of the Tested Man

In The Age of Innocence, the moral stakes are less ambiguous while also seeming less important. There are moral considerations at stake in Archer’s and Ellen’s decisions, but these are far outweighed by their concern for their social responsibilities. As mentioned above, The Age of Innocence is widely discussed as Wharton’s return to the subject matter and setting of The House of Mirth, but from a less critical perspective.
Here, I will argue that *The Age of Innocence* is indeed a revisiting of the themes and conflicts of *The House of Mirth*; but instead of having a less critical emphasis, as some scholars argue, the later novel, as I read it, undermines the traditional tested woman plot through distinctly modernist modes of experimentation.

In 1971, Brenda Niall published an article whose title, “Prufrock in Brownstone: Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*,” hints at the implicit social critique in *The Age of Innocence*. Niall invokes “Prufrock” to emphasize Newland Archer’s paralysis within old New York. In *The House of Mirth*, the tested woman plot serves as a harsh indictment of the moral state of high society. In contrast, in the first half of *The Age of Innocence* Wharton experiments with the tested woman plot in order to direct her criticism of high society at the paralyzing customs of the New York elite, rather than at the moral vacuum this society creates. In Newland Archer, Wharton indeed creates another Prufrock figure, paralyzed by social conventions and ultimately his own indecision. Archer’s paralysis makes him, like Prufrock, a typically modernist feminized male figure – stifled and oppressed by the societal conventions that surround him. For Wharton, Archer provides the perfect modernist twist to the tested woman plot – the tested, but feminized, man takes the place of the woman. In the second half of the novel, Archer is able to break his paralysis enough to pursue Ellen Olenska, and the resulting tests the two undergo create the dramatic tension of the second half of the novel.

Of course, the first and most obvious modification Wharton makes to the tested woman plot in *The Age of Innocence* is changing the tested woman figure to that of a
tested man. In many ways, Archer fits Bueler’s definition of the woman figure as subject to conflicting claims of authority and ownership better than Lily Bart. Lily is almost entirely without family, and her relationship with her Aunt Julia is such that Julia asserts her authority over Lily’s behavior only after her (Julia’s) death – by disinheriting her. Archer, on the other hand, is subject to the claims of family – which, in this novel, are strong and even coercive. Archer must keep his own relations happy, but he is also increasingly forced to change his behavior to suit the new family that he will inherit when he marries May Welland. As much as Archer bemoans May’s insistence on doing what the family wants in all things, Archer himself submits every bit of his behavior to the scrutiny of the family. When he leaves work unexpectedly to surprise May in Florida, Archer comes close to self-realization in this matter: “he, who fancied himself so scornful of arbitrary restraints, had been afraid to break away from his desk because of what people might think of his stealing a holiday!” (90). Here, Archer seems to realize the degree to which his behavior is still dictated by society; however, he continues to be unaware of his submission to family when he mentally justifies his action in the next paragraph: “how soon he would be forgiven, and how soon even Mr Letterblair’s mild disapproval would be smiled away by a tolerant family” (90). Immediately after criticizing himself for being too concerned about society’s opinion, he is still unconsciously allowing the opinion of family (here, that of his wife-to-be) to legitimate his behavior. In this way, as he constantly negotiates between the behavior he is drawn to
and that which will meet the approval of both families, Archer is closely aligned with the contested figure of the tested woman plot.

Archer’s first “test” with Ellen comes when he visits her little house after the van der Luydens' party. This meeting is Archer’s first experience of Ellen’s idiosyncratic tastes and living habits, which transform her shabby house into “something intimate, ‘foreign,’ subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments” (45). This visit, despite beginning with his annoyance at being seemingly forgotten, ultimately results in his seeing New York in an entirely new way: “through the wrong end of a telescope,” making it seem “disconcertingly small and distant” (49). At the end of this encounter, Archer realizes that he has “called [Madame Olenska] ‘Ellen’ – called her so twice; and that she had not noticed” (50). This realization follows an intimate scene in which Ellen weeps and Archer comforts her. The reader is encouraged to read the scene as romantic, because the narrator (and Archer’s own mind) continually return to his fiancée May, creating a contrast between the worldly and perceptive Ellen and the innocent and thoroughly conventional May. May comes off, to Archer at least, as nothing more than a “faint white figure” (50), weak and insubstantial next to the passionate intensity and unconventionality of Ellen Olenska.

At the end of this intense interview, Archer has the choice of embracing his new view of New York society, but he rejects it in favor of his old prejudices. When the Duke of St Austrey comes in with a social climber, the widow of a tradesman, Archer reverts to his conventional attitudes and departs quickly. When he steps out of the house, “New
York again became vast and imminent, and May Welland the loveliest woman in it” (51). This judgment does not simply represent a choice between two possible romantic partners but a monumental life choice that concerns how Archer desires to perceive and interact with the world. Ellen represents a wider world, filled with rich and varied experiences, of which New York only makes up a small part. Because the choice between Ellen and May is framed in this way, Archer’s choosing May is tantamount to the choice of a smaller, more circumscribed world.⁷

The scene discussed above enacts a cycle: Archer in intimate contact and conversation with Ellen, his subsequently becoming aware of the oppressive nature of his society and his growing attachment to Ellen, and finally his being surprised out of his new, more expansive understanding and reverting to conventional judgments. This cycle, which is the test process in this modified version of the tested woman plot, is repeated throughout the novel. In this novel, the test stage consists primarily of Archer being confronted with something his upbringing has trained him to view as vulgar and having to attempt to maintain his new perspective on New York society or revert. Time after time in the first half of the novel, Archer becomes paralyzed and returns to the safety of convention. After the scene in the van der Luydens’ cottage, the arrival of Beaufort, despite Archer’s recognition of Ellen’s annoyance at his unwelcome presence, sends Archer back to New York, and then to Florida to visit May. Archer recognizes that Ellen does not seem romantically interested in Beaufort, and yet Beaufort’s interest in her is enough to send Archer running back to his conventional betrothed – even though he is
continually exasperated by her conventionality. When he is with Ellen he gains perspective, but when he is required to act in conformity with that perspective (by accepting friends or acquaintances considered inappropriate by New York society, for example), he always fails to act, and in doing so, fails the test. He subsequently reverts to his traditional, and more comfortable, way of viewing the world.

Because of Wharton’s use of internal focalization (or figural narration) in the novel, centering her account on Archer’s perceptions of the world, Ellen’s testing and trials are secondary to his own, subordinated to his view of himself as the primary player in the drama. Nonetheless, Ellen is also tested, and the interplay between her tests and Archer’s tests create much of the tension of the second half of the novel. She, of course, shares passionate scenes with Archer, and it is her objections (and Archer’s inability to overcome those objections) that prevent the two from becoming lovers. Ellen is also the character who most obviously undergoes a trial stage (the scandal of her marriage is discussed and her integrity and virtue cross-examined repeatedly). At the midpoint of the novel, when both characters acknowledge their love for one another, Archer is willing to walk away from his engagement, but it is Ellen who puts the encounter in terms of a moral choice, that they must do what Archer taught her one ought to do: “sacrifice oneself to preserve the dignity of marriage…and to spare one’s family the publicity, the scandal” (108). When Archer attempts to reverse her arguments, claiming it would be dishonest to go forward with his marriage, Ellen again gets the best of him: “You say that because it’s the easiest thing to say at this moment – not because it’s true. In reality it’s
too late to do anything but what we’d both decided on” (110). Ellen stages the choice as one between the corruption and deception she knew with her husband in Europe, and the new comfort and safety she has found in New York, which Archer taught her:

“But you knew; you understood; you had felt the world tugging at one with all its golden hands – and yet you hated the things it asks of one; you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I’d never known before – and it’s better than anything I’ve known.” (110)

Ellen not only forces Archer to choose between what is right and what is wrong, she also forces him to see his decision as one in which he decides the fate and happiness of others – just as he argued that she must do when she was considering her divorce.

Whereas in the first half of the novel, Archer is paralyzed by convention and repeatedly returns to May, in the second half of the novel, he struggles to balance his desire to pursue Ellen with his desire to uphold the values Ellen continually defends in their exchanges. However, despite his desire to act in this section of the novel, his actual ability to do so is contained by Ellen, who gets the better of him in all of their exchanges, both with her moral arguments (many that she learned from him, as in the example above), and with her presence: “If he could have got her in his arms again he might have swept away her arguments; but she still held him at a distance by something inscrutably aloof in her look and attitude, and by his own awed sense of her sincerity” (111). Like Lily in *The House of Mirth*, Ellen exerts a great deal of power over the men in her life, and over Archer in particular. Also like Lily, that power is narrowly focused and always potentially dangerous, as Ellen’s relationship with Julius Beaufort makes clear.
However, unlike in *The House of Mirth*, where no matter what choice Lily makes, she is doomed, Ellen has more options, and her choices have more positive effects, mostly because of her wealthy family connections. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton gives Ellen the power to forestall the traditional movement of the romance plot, with its tendency to sweep away the moral and social arguments of the tested woman. Thus, Archer, in his desire to act and to make Ellen his wife or his mistress, is always stymied. If successfully passing his tests means remaining with his wife and attempting to uphold the values Ellen espouses, then Archer only passes because Ellen passes hers.

Wharton compounds Archer’s relative inability to move the plot forward in the first half of the novel with another significant change to the tested woman plot: the lack of a formal trial stage. Taken together, these characteristics of Archer’s tested woman plot reveal that the stakes are always smaller for men than for women in situations that deal with morality. Archer is never in peril the way that Lily is in peril. Women are in the position to judge in this novel, as in *The House of Mirth*, but in *The Age of Innocence* a formal trial stage is never represented; all of the judgment happens offstage. Indeed, for most of the novel (until the final dinner party scene), Archer believes that he alone judges his own behavior, and he seems to be mostly unaware of his own failings.

By contrast, Lily Bart, like most women in the tested woman plot (including Ellen and May), is constantly aware that she is being observed and judged. Archer can’t see the trial phase because, as a man, he has been raised to believe himself impervious to the external judgments of women. However, despite Archer’s obliviousness, the outside
world is judging him. When Archer happens to encounter Ellen leaving Mrs. Beaufort’s house, he rightly worries that she will be seen and judged for her visit. However, though he recognizes Lawrence Lefferts (the known adulterer in the novel) and young Chivers, and notices that they cross the street and discreetly avoid passing Archer and Ellen on the street, Archer never considers that they might be judging him. However, as the dinner party May and Archer throw for Ellen shows, all of Archer’s friends have judged him, and found him guilty of adultery.

It is May’s actions that reveal the trial phase most clearly. When Archer is on the verge of telling May he is leaving her (after the dinner party in honor of Ellen’s departure for Europe), May reveals to him that she is pregnant, and he stays with her, renouncing his hopes of happiness with Ellen. Archer and the reader realize that immediately after Ellen agreed to “come to him once,” May met with her and told her she was pregnant, even though she wasn’t entirely sure. Here it becomes clear that May has been playing the role of judge in the trial phase that has occurred “off-stage.” She has correctly guessed the nature of Archer and Ellen’s relationship, and successfully intervenes in Archer and Ellen’s tests. In addition to her function as judge, May is also a tested woman, although her tests and trials are more off-stage than Ellen’s, primarily because Archer has trouble conceiving of May as a thinking, feeling human being. He sees her (more so with his increasing attachment to Ellen) as merely a product of her surroundings, a representative of the repressiveness of New York society.
However, it becomes clear in key scenes – in particular, the scene in Florida and after the dinner party when she tells Archer she is pregnant – that May is aware of much more than Archer gives her credit for, and that she is actively attempting to either clear the way for Archer to have the life he wants with the woman he loves, or to secure her own family. In the first test in Florida, May is behaving “virtuously” according to the idealistic values Archer has attempted to teach her during their courtship. She is willing to sacrifice her own happiness to ensure Archer’s. In the second test after the dinner party, May invokes the values of home and family; she is protecting her marriage and her unborn child. May is also on trial, as much as Ellen, although the jury is much more in her favor as the wronged wife of a straying man.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton recasts the traditional tested woman plot to involve two tested “women.” While, like Lily, these tested characters are in difficult situations in which the moral stakes are unclear, in *The Age of Innocence*, the outcomes for the characters are much less dire. The tension between Archer and Ellen’s tested woman plots ultimately results in the triumph of Ellen’s more socially conscious moral stance, and ends by reinforcing the value of responsibility to the community that Archer impressed upon Ellen at the beginning of the story. The carefully timed revelation of May’s pregnancy destroys Ellen’s resolve to “come to him once” and reestablishes the necessity of sacrificing for the good of others. While Archer is able to overcome the paralysis he suffers in the first half of the novel, his agency is ultimately contained by Ellen and May’s awareness of and concern for the interconnectedness of their plots.
Holtby’s Revised Romance

Whereas Wharton revises a tested woman plot from her own oeuvre, in Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding*, Holtby revises a tested woman plot from an iconic English novel – Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Holtby invokes the plot of *Jane Eyre*, a prototypical incarnation of the tested woman plot, in order to cue readers to interpret the novel as a romance. By subtly changing elements of this traditional plot type, Holtby eventually transforms the novel into one that is more about social change and the relationship of the individual to society than about the romantic relationship between two individuals. In other words, Holtby interweaves a plot of social change and conflicting social forces with a prototypical love plot. She uses *Jane Eyre* to build reader expectations, only to reverse those expectations at the end of the novel.

Holtby’s submerged experimentation with this plot structure is particularly interesting and unique because she uses the traditional tested woman plot as scaffolding for a more subversive plot structure. As discussed in the introduction, submerged experimentation takes a variety of forms to match the variety of its possible motivations. In Chapters 2 and 3, I argue that Barnes and Fitzgerald engaged in submerged experimentation for more or less similar reasons: in order to mask their more subversive experimental impulses from the casual reader, thus making their work commercially viable while also incorporating highbrow modes of experimentation and critique. In *South Riding*, Holtby uses submerged experimentation in order to prepare readers to accept a plot structure that they would not readily accept on its own. Instead of
beginning with an openly “social novel” (such novels were common, and were frequently mocked by critics and reviewers), Holtby creates an interpretive framework for the reader, providing a familiar romance plot and a seemingly traditional tested woman plot. She then manipulates the plot structure one piece at a time, until she has completely removed all traces of romance, and the novel’s heroine emerges as the main character in an entirely different plot.

Holtby was a firmly middlebrow writer, and critics considered her works examples of good workmanship without any additional artistic flair. *South Riding* was Holtby’s last novel, and was published not long after her death. The criticism of the novel is measured, perhaps because of this fact. The best Robert Van Gelder of *The New York Times* managed to say about the novel was that it avoids the “well worn towpath where so many diligent English women scholars have plodded to laboriously to bring their social science research results to the fiction market” (21). Fanny Butcher, in a review published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, writes that “life surges through the pages of ‘South Riding’,” but ends her review with the more measured conclusion that “it is […] in its less exciting and less fascinating way, a better novel [than *Mandoa, Mandoa*], and one which adds to the reader’s sorrow at the untimely death of its author” (10). Percy Hutchison writes that the “fiction is on a grand scale, but the writing is not in the grand manner”; however, Hutchison disagrees with Van Gelder, calling the “plan of the novel” “highly original” (BR3). He praises Holtby’s “skill as a dramatizing novelist” and her “adroit” handling of the central story (BR3). Despite these accolades, Hutchison does
concede that “it must not be concluded that Miss Holtby is in any degree technical. True, she prefaces each division of her novel with an (imaginary) order in council […] but except for this whimsy there is no other formality assumed in the book” (BR3). This sampling of reviews is representative of the whole; reviewers and critics praise Holtby’s skill in the handling of character and sometimes the more nebulous “story,” but simultaneously insist that she is not creating “technical” or “formal” works.10

South Riding is, as many critics pointed out, a sprawling novel, with nearly two hundred characters (listed in the front of the novel, and including a horse and an Alsatian dog). The characters range in age and standing from Len Holly, an infant born in “the shacks” (the poorest area of the county), to the nearly ruined but much-loved landowner and Alderman Robert Carne of Maythorpe Hall, to the wealthy but despised Alderman Anthony Snaith. The novel chronicles how seemingly minute proposals approved or rejected in county council impact the lives of the people living in the county – sometimes with life-or-death consequences. However, despite the wide-ranging scope of the novel, it is also a love story. The novel returns repeatedly to the relationship between the newly appointed schoolmistress, Sarah Burton, and Robert Carne. The plot of the novel thus revolves around the developing relationship between this mismatched pair (they begin by disliking each other on sight), and Holtby’s submerged experimentation revolves around her careful manipulation of the romance plot.

Although there are many possible audiences for any novel, this reading will focus on two primary authorial audiences: those who are inclined to read the end of Jane Eyre
as happy and resolved, and those who are inclined to read “against the grain” of the happy ending. Those who read Jane Eyre’s ending as happy and resolved are cued to expect a similar plot from South Riding, only to have their expectations frustrated. Those who read against the grain will see the irony of Holtby’s intertextual cues and be more prepared for the change in plot type.

As many of her reviewers noted, Holtby’s novel was unique in its design, if seemingly conventional in its aims. The novel is structured around the activities of the (fictional) South Riding county council, and is divided into sections according to the issues about which the council makes decisions (education, highways and bridges, agriculture and small holdings, public health, public assistance, mental deficiency, finance, and housing and town planning). Each section is introduced with an extract from the council’s proceedings, written in the dry language of official documentation. The section that follows illustrates the human impact of such ostensibly unimportant proceedings. This is reinforced by the prologue, which is set in the press gallery of the South Riding County Council, where a new reporter takes his place for the first time, “prepared to be impressed by everything” because he “knew that local government has considerable importance in its effect on human life” (3). The proceedings turn out to be so dry that the young reporter is convinced of his mistake: “Lovell had come expectant of drama, indignation, combat, amusement, shock. He found boredom and monotony. Disillusion chastened him” (10). Holtby spends the rest of the novel showing how correct Lovell’s original expectations were, and how misleading the lack of drama in the
council proceedings really is. The proceedings that the reporter finds so dull have repercussions, including death and dire poverty, for the characters of the novel. This contrast between initial impression and actual outcomes, is also part of Hotlby’s submerged experimentation – and a cue to the reader that he or she should read carefully, and not rely too heavily on first impressions.

From its opening pages, the novel implicitly invokes Jane Eyre. It opens with Midge Carne, daughter of Robert Carne and Muriel Carne née Sedgmire (daughter of a Baron), praying for her mother’s recovery. In the course of this scene, the reader learns that Carne’s aristocratic wife is insane, and locked away in an asylum. This, combined with the large manor and the daughter character,\(^{11}\) already begin to hint at similarities with Jane Eyre. Carne is also described as physically similar to Jane Eyre’s Rochester; when Sarah first sees him at her interview for the headmistress position, he is described as “a large dark sullen man” who seems “entirely indifferent to her” (26). This implicit reference becomes explicit during a particularly charged meeting between the two figures. The first meeting of Jane and Rochester occurs when Jane is resting on the stile between town and Thornfield Hall, and happens to be present when Rochester’s horse falls in the road. She is able to assist him in getting back on his horse, only to find out later that he is, in fact, the master of the house she is employed in. An echo of this famous meeting occurs in South Riding, when Sarah, having sent her students out on a cross-country race, encounters Carne in a field. He surprises her, appearing as “a big dark man on a big dark horse, towering above her from a bank of snow” (137). Despite
her practical nature, her first thought is that “some romantic sinister aspect of the snow-scene had taken heroic shape” and then, even after she has recovered her wits and is able to respond to Carne’s accusation of trespassing, “into Sarah’s irreverent and well-educated mind flashed the memory of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester” (137). The romantic and even gothic elements of this scene are oddly out of place in Holtby’s primarily realist novel; they do, however, powerfully invoke the supernatural elements of the corresponding scene from *Jane Eyre*. From this point in the novel, the plot of *Jane Eyre*, in particular its iteration of the tested woman plot, serves to direct (often to purposefully misdirect) reader expectations, and contributes significantly to the effect of Holtby’s submerged manipulation of the tested woman plot in her own narrative.

In *South Riding*, Holtby uses *Jane Eyre* both as a touchstone of the romantic plot generally, and of the tested woman plot more specifically. *Jane Eyre* demonstrates a fairly typical tested woman plot, according to Bueler’s definition. Interestingly, one departure is that Jane is relatively free from the claims of patriarchal authority. While patriarchy is a constant force with which Jane negotiates throughout the novel, as an orphan and a single woman Jane is not directly subject to the claims of patriarchy. The most significant exceptions to this general pattern are in the very beginning of the novel, when she is living with her aunt, and when she is at Lowood, where she is subject to the tyrannical and deeply religious patriarchal power of Mr. Brocklehurst. Even when she is employed by Mr. Rochester, his influence is secondary (at first), being mediated by Mrs. Fairfax. In addition, Jane emphasizes throughout the novel that she is always free to seek
another “place” if she becomes unhappy at her current job, although the novel’s plot troubles this belief on her part; Jane’s flight from Thornfield nearly results in her death from starvation and exposure. Patriarchy constrains Jane’s life and choices throughout the novel, but it has no direct representative, as it traditionally would in Bueler’s model of the tested woman plot.

In Brontë’s novel, Jane undergoes two different types of tests: those administered by Rochester on purpose to see how she reacts to different situations and environments, and those presented by two inappropriate proposals of marriage. Both test her virtue, although the definition of virtue shifts depending on the type of test. In the tests Rochester administers, he also serves as judge in the trial phase, which frequently happens offstage (he later tells Jane that he pretended to woo Blanche Ingram in order to make Jane jealous – presumably to make her give some sign of her interest in him, which would, in Jane’s world, be tantamount to a loss of virtue).

The most significant test Jane faces in the novel is arguably her decision to leave Thornfield when the full truth of Rochester’s past is revealed. This test is particularly difficult because, with no living relatives (and therefore no direct patriarchal authority in the way that Bueler discusses it), Jane could accept Rochester’s offer and travel with him to the south of France without fear of discovery or bringing shame on her family. Jane undergoes an internal struggle when Rochester challenges her, asking: “Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law – no man being injured by the breach? for you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need
fear to offend by living with me” (312). As she considers his plea, “Conscience and Reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with crime in resisting him […] Who in the world cares for you? or who will be injured by what you do?” (312). Both Rochester and Jane assume the same patriarchal model of woman’s virtue that Bueler critiques – a woman’s virtue is only significant insofar as it affects a male authority figure. With no family, and therefore no patriarch seeking to exert control over her (besides Rochester), Jane’s virtue seems to be a nonissue. It is only by a supreme act of will that Jane rejects this logic (which is clearly the reigning logic of her time and culture) to assert:

_I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained [sic] I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man […] Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour._ (312)

Here Jane asserts her own virtue and integrity, despite the fact that there is no patriarchal figure directly responsible for her. This case, then, is more similar to the case of Job, as characterized by Bueler, than the other tested woman plots she examines. Bueler argues that in the story of Job, God takes the role of the patriarch, exerting authority over Job – it is to God that Job’s righteousness is important, just as it is to the patriarchy that a woman’s virtue is important. In _Jane Eyre_, since Jane is not subject to the control of patriarchy, her test of virtue is referred to God, as Job’s is: “Because God enters the story as a dramatic character, no woman is needed; a man may be tested directly because he can confront that authority directly” (Bueler 27-8). The main difference between Jane’s
case and Job’s is that God does not enter the world of the novel as a character. However, Jane invokes God as a powerful presence and as the only figure who can claim authority over her. God does come close to appearing as a character in the scene when Jane speaks to the moon in a vision, and it tells her, “My daughter, flee temptation!” (315). This scene, if it does not represent God, does represent some sort of spiritual authority for Jane, and reinforces her decision to leave Rochester.

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane successfully negotiates the test phase. Since the ultimate patriarchal authority in this plot is God, rather than Jane’s father, the trial stage is necessarily different. Ultimately, the conflict between the two representatives of patriarchal power (God and Rochester) must be resolved, and this is accomplished by two events: the death of Rochester’s wife (despite his attempts to save her, which result in his disfigurement and offset his culpability for her death), and Jane’s decision to return to Rochester, after a supernatural summons seems to confirm their bond. The trial stage in this novel is short and narrated in retrospect – the judges are Jane’s newly discovered cousins Diana and Mary, and Jane serves as her own defender, explaining to them in a letter everything that happened and her own actions. Diana and Mary, who have been established as ideal models of intelligence, piety, and virtue, “approved the step unreservedly” (438). Of course, in another sense, the entire novel serves as Jane’s defense of her actions, and her testimony of how she withstood temptation and acted virtuously. Ultimately, the happy ending in *Jane Eyre* reconciles Jane’s obedience to God with her obedience to, and love for, Rochester.

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*Jane Eyre*, then, stands as an example of the tested woman plot for Holtby’s novel. *Jane Eyre* was a well-known novel during the modernist period (Woolf famously critiques Brontë for allowing her anger to enter too fully into the composition of *Jane Eyre*), and Holtby could have reasonably expected her readers to be familiar with it and, likely, have a fondness for it (Woolf 68-70). Regardless of their feelings for the novel, however, readers could be expected to be familiar with the plot of *Jane Eyre*, and to be prepared to invoke its structures and tropes when cued.\(^{13}\) Indeed, Holtby repeatedly cues readers to activate their knowledge of Brontë’s plot, both by creating similar constellations of characters and putting them in analogous situations, and by explicitly referring to the novel, as Sarah Burton does when she encounters Robert Carne in a snowy field. As the parallels between the two novels accumulate, it becomes more difficult for readers familiar with *Jane Eyre* to ignore the implications for the plot of *South Riding*.

Among these parallels are the similarities, both situational and physical, between Robert Carne and Edward Rochester, as well as the similarities between Sarah Burton and Jane Eyre. There are, in fact, significant differences between Sarah and Jane, but Holtby deemphasizes those differences and focuses instead on those ways in which they are alike. The biggest difference between the two is that Jane is a young, inexperienced girl when she meets Rochester, whereas Sarah is thirty-nine and has been engaged three times when she meets Carne. However, Sarah’s behavior (such as running to catch a bus and impulsively bathing on the beach when she first arrives in town) makes her seem
much younger than her thirty-nine years. In addition, in *Jane Eyre* Jane ruthlessly describes herself as plain, and in *South Riding* Sarah is repeatedly referred to as “plain.” Holtby describes Sarah’s defects in the reader’s initial encounter with her: “her face was not pretty at all, the nose too large, the mouth too wide; the small, quick, intelligent eyes were light and green” (25). Jane laments that her hair will never curl like Blanche Ingram’s; Sarah’s main concern about her appearance is her hair as well, which is “red – not mildly ginger but vivid, springing, wiry, glowing, almost crimson, red. Astonishing hair” (24). Further, as with Jane and Rochester, the relationship between Sarah and Robert begins as an oppositional one.

At the outset of Sarah and Robert’s relationship, the reader gets enough access to Robert’s point of view to learn that he dislikes her partly on the basis of his memory of her father laming a favorite horse, and partly because she does not fit the ideal image of a schoolmistress to whom he would like to entrust his daughter, one with “experience and sympathy and a big motherly bosom on which a little girl could cry comfortably […] Miss Burton was neither gentle nor a lady, and her bosom was flat and bony as a boy’s” (32). As the relationship between the two progresses, the reader gets less access to Robert’s thoughts about Sarah, which makes Carne more similar to the inscrutable Rochester. We are privy to Robert’s concerns about Midge and Muriel (the wife being tended in an expensive “home”), but not his thoughts concerning Sarah Burton, at least until the end of the novel.
The relationship between Sarah and Robert progresses slowly over the course of the novel, during which time the two begin to develop a mutual respect and Sarah falls in love with Robert. After their initial meeting, and their encounter in the snow when Robert accuses Sarah and her students of trespassing, their next significant encounter takes place at night, when Sarah happens upon Robert attempting to deliver a baby calf. She remains and assists him, despite the gory nature of the scene, and in the process helps him to save the cow and calf, which are valuable to a struggling farmer like Robert. Working side by side at this task, the two begin to overcome their previous antipathy, and Sarah, in particular, “found a strange satisfaction in obeying his commands, accepting his domination, working with him in silent co-operation” (187). This sentiment echoes the dynamic of the relationship between Jane and Rochester. However, at the end of the evening, after Robert has carefully made arrangements for Sarah to bathe and change her clothes before returning home, she is shocked to see the “unveiled, the bleak repulsion of his somber enmity” (193). This enmity is slowly eroded by a period of forced intimacy. Robert’s daughter, Midge, is among a group of girls at Sarah’s school who become ill with the measles and have to be quarantined in Sarah’s house. Sarah and Robert sit up together with Midge throughout her illness, and Robert begins to appreciate Sarah’s intelligence and efficiency, as well as the care she takes of his daughter, despite a “bosom as bony as a boy’s.”

A realist middlebrow novel, *South Riding* appears to have one of the most traditional tested woman plots, according to Bueler’s model. Toward the end of the
novel, after Sarah and Robert’s relationship begins to improve, they encounter each other by chance in a hotel in Manchester. She is pleased that he is genuinely glad to see her, and they share a drink and then dinner. The scene that follows, and the rest of the novel, fall into the three components of Bueler’s model quite neatly, with one exception.

Holtby’s most striking innovation in this text is that the moral test stage results in Sarah choosing what would traditionally be considered the immoral choice, and therefore failing the test stage of the plot. Furthermore, Sarah actually occupies almost all of the roles that Bueler’s model assigns to male authority figures: she acts as temptress, and then later in the novel she initiates the trial stage (taking the role of accuser and refusing to act as her own defender). The only role Sarah doesn’t take is that of judge – that is reserved for another female character in the novel.

Sarah recognizes the evening that she spends with Robert as a moral choice, and it is one that she makes without hesitation or regret. Before she even meets Carne for dinner, Sarah has made key choices that indicate the direction the night will take: “she flung off her travel-crumped clothes and washed and powdered her slim youthful body. She redressed herself without remorse in the satin under-garments she had bought for her sister” (393). All of Sarah’s preparations take on the tone of planning for a great event, rather than a daunting moral test: “no words could describe, to no one could she communicate, this extraordinary rapture which had transformed the universe – because she was going to eat a third-rate dinner in a second-rate hotel, with a ruined farmer who was father to one of her least satisfactory pupils” (393). Sarah feels this exultation
despite the fact that she recognizes her position and the relative shabiness of the setting of the dinner that she plans to turn into a romantic encounter. Instead of being concerned about the moral implications of her preparations, or of her conscious attempts to prolong their evening – with coffee, then drinks, then dancing – Sarah is most concerned about her inability to guess Robert’s thoughts. As they dance together, she thinks, “I know […] when he’s going to dip, pause, turn; I know nothing of his mind, nothing, nothing, nothing. […] She could never learn his heart” (399). What matters to Sarah here is not her potential transgression, but her inability to know the mind of the man she plans to tempt.

As Sarah realizes that Robert wants her to stay, her excitement momentarily overshadows the importance of the decision she is making. However, immediately after telling Robert Carne that he may come to her room, she thinks clearly about what she is doing:

Her mind was quite cold. He is drunk, she thought; he has forgotten who I am or who he is; he thinks I am a little tart. Well? I am Sarah Burton; I have Kiplington High School; he is a governor. This may destroy me. Even if I do not have his child, this may destroy me. I will be his little tart; I will comfort him for one night. (402)

Here Sarah seems to recognize the plot structure she is playing out – she acknowledges that she is making a moral choice and that even if Robert is not accountable for his actions, she is. Since the reader has been cued up to this point to read the novel and its characters in parallel with Jane Eyre, Sarah defies expectations by choosing wholeheartedly to give herself to Robert. In addition, for readers who read Jane Eyre’s
ending as unproblematic and happy, the coming disruption to the plot will be all the more shocking. On the other hand, those readers who read *Jane Eyre* against the grain are able to see the irony of Holtby’s comparison and anticipate the necessity of Robert’s elimination from the plot. These readers will likely not read the ending as a happy one, and see the comparison between Rochester and Robert as a sign that he is an inappropriate match for Sarah.

The importance of Sarah’s choice is reinforced when Robert comes to her room, and asks again if she is sure. Immediately after she tells him she is, Robert is overcome by a violent seizure – before they can commit the act Sarah has considered so carefully, Robert has a massive heart attack while standing at the foot of her bed. Nevertheless, in Bueler’s model of the tested woman plot, it is the woman’s choice that matters, and that is the case in Holtby’s novel as well. Once Sarah has made the choice to sleep with Robert Carne, and he has come to her room, the potential damage is done, as Sarah recognizes when she considers calling for a doctor. She knows that his presence in her room at such a late hour could ruin her career, regardless of what actually happened, and accepts this consequence. In Bueler’s model, one of the most important features of the test stage is that the character must recognize that she is making a choice of moral significance. Sarah clearly does that here, and what is more, she seems aware that the choice is part of a larger plot structure that she is enacting. With this awareness, Holtby begins to draw attention to her submerged experimentation – to the subtle but cumulative changes she is making to the tested woman plot.
At the end of the scene, during which Sarah sits up all night with Robert clutching her hand so that she cannot leave to call the doctor, Sarah refers explicitly to the plot she is involved in: “she thought – This story could not have a happy ending. It did not even have a happy beginning. I deserved this. Whether he lived or died the results were equal. He belonged to a past age; his world was in ruins. There was no hope for him – alive or dead” (408). Here, Sarah reflects on the events of the novel as a story, or a plot, and here Holtby begins to change the terms of the tested woman plot that she has been creating. The change begins subtly, keeping the experimentation with plot submerged: for instance, Sarah’s powerful emotional reaction can be read as traditional remorse for transgression. When her reaction is placed in context, though, it is clear that her emotion is not due to having chosen an immoral action, but because she has invested her emotions in a figure who embodies social values she can no longer believe in. The source of her torment here is that there was no hope for Robert, and that is why she “deserved” the disappointment – not because she had made an immoral choice. Holtby thus revises the tested woman plot to make it about changing social values, rather than about a woman’s virtue. Carne is part of a failing agricultural system, and Sarah, along with her Socialist friends, represents the forces attempting to bring an end to that system as quickly as possible. Holtby interweaves this clash of social forces with the prototypical love plot, borrowing most heavily from Jane Eyre, in order to build and then subvert reader expectations. Readers expect the ecstatic, “Reader, I married him,” and instead get a dramatic reversal of the expectations the author has encouraged (Bronte 437).
This emphasis on the relationship of the individual to society, rather than the romantic relationship between two individuals, is reinforced during the trial phase of *South Riding*’s tested woman plot. This scene occurs at the end of the novel, after Robert Carne has mysteriously disappeared (readers are privy to his death scene, but in the world of the novel, no one knows whether he has run off, committed suicide, or fallen from a cliff accidently). Robert Carne dies in an accident while riding at night on a crumbling cliff-side path. He is distracted by pain in his hand, wondering if it might be more heart trouble, and hurries his horse along the uncertain path. He is further distracted by thoughts of his wife, Muriel, and of Sarah. He feels humiliated by what happened in the hotel room, feeling “that he had cut a poor figure” and just as strongly as the pain, he remembers being “incapable of control, making a complete fool of himself” (472). However, Robert thinks of Sarah fondly, knowing that she will forgive him because he is “sure of her fundamental courage and generosity,” and he is thankful that such an attack happened with her and not his wife (472). In the midst of these thoughts, Carne’s horse is startled by a bird and rears, which causes the path to crumble beneath its hooves. His last thoughts are not of his wife, Muriel, but of Sarah; as he falls he catches sight of the sun disappearing on the horizon and imagines Sarah: “recognising Sarah’s brave oriflamme of hair, remembering her gallantry, comforted and flattered by her kindness, he turned to see the white waves roaring upwards beneath him, and saw no more forever” (473).
The solitude of Carne’s death, combined with the state of his affairs (the bank is preparing to sell his house, and he will likely have to leave the county and become a riding instructor in Manchester), make people suspicious that he has simply left town. When the body of his horse is discovered at the bottom of the cliff, people speculate that he has committed suicide. This uncertainty is why Sarah chooses to reveal to Mrs. Beddows the story of her meeting with Robert in the hotel. Mrs. Beddows is the elderly Alderwoman who was closest to Robert Carne, and who has taken in his daughter. She is introduced in the first pages of the novel as “a portent; she was a mascot; she was the first woman alderman in the South riding and therefore she must be a character” (6). At seventy years old, she is a caring and motherly figure but also a formidable representative of traditional moral values combined with a modern sensibility. Sarah maintains her silence until she realizes that even Mrs. Beddows, Carne’s closest friend, thinks it is possible he’s killed himself. Through Sarah and Mrs. Beddows’ conversation, Holtby again shifts a commonplace moral question into a civil or social one. When Mrs. Beddows expresses her doubts about Carne’s fate, Sarah asks if she thinks suicide is a sin, and Mrs. Beddows replies, “perhaps not exactly a sin. But it was so unlike him. He never shirked anything. No matter how unpleasant” (536). Even the question of suicide is here transformed into a question of social duty; by committing suicide, Robert Carne would have been avoiding his duties to society, and therefore would have been culpable. In the conversation that follows, Mrs. Beddows dismisses Sarah’s concerns about the moral implications of her actions in favor of a vision of social service and change.
Sarah explains what happened in the hotel between Carne so that Mrs. Beddows will understand that Carne was very ill (the fact that he had prepared his will, taken out an insurance policy, and arranged his affairs with the bank are major reasons that everyone suspects suicide). She also wants to convince Mrs. Beddows that Carne himself knew he was ill, and was preparing against another, fatal, heart attack, rather than planning suicide. This conversation takes the form of the trial phase of Bueler’s tested woman plot, and in it, Sarah tells her own tale but refuses to offer a defense of her actions, instead acting as her own accuser, emphasizing throughout that she wanted to be Carne’s lover. At the end of her confession she says, “So you see. You know everything now—what sort of person I am, and how unfit to keep school here. You are a governor and an alderman. You can deal with me as you think fit with the situation. But I will send in my resignation at once” (539). Sarah recognizes Mrs. Beddows’s position and authority as judge, and awaits her verdict, assuming it will be negative. Sarah is in the position to play the role of defender, but does not; indeed, she plays the role of the accuser much more fully. She refuses to believe when Mrs. Beddows tells her that Carne admired her, saying that “he altered his mind when I behaved – like a bitch in heat, like a cat on the roof” and Mrs. Beddows refuses to allow this: “hush. Be quiet. I won’t have you say such things. It’s ugly and horrid and false and it doesn’t help” (541). Even in the midst of a hysterical scene, the emphasis lies on practicality, on the use value of behavior, rather than its moral weight.
This emphasis on the use of experience and behavior carries over into Mrs. Beddows’ eventual judgment of Sarah’s conduct. She begins by telling her, “you mustn’t think of resigning, because you are needed here. I don’t say you’ve behaved well. I don’t think you did” (542). But Mrs. Beddows goes on to admit that if she herself was younger, she would have been tempted to “comfort” Carne in just the way Sarah hoped to. When Sarah responds by saying that she is ashamed of herself and miserable and therefore unable to continue, Mrs. Beddows again returns to the use value of experience – not to moral questions or to the issue of Sarah’s virtue:

Now listen to me, my dear. I don’t know much about your past life. You may have done many wrong things in it for all I know. You may have been loose in your morals, as they say all young people are nowadays. That’s not my business. I don’t know and I don’t want to. But I tell you what is my business, and that’s the kind of woman you are and the teacher you will be. (543)

In this short speech, Holtby, through Mrs. Beddows, divorces “what kind of woman” Sarah is entirely from the question of her “virtue” or sexual purity. Instead, Mrs. Beddows emphasizes Sarah’s achievements and claims that this experience will make Sarah a better headmistress and teacher because now she knows “what it is to be defeated” and “what it is to feel ashamed” (543). Mrs. Beddows ends her speech with a vision of local government and social change: “As I see it, when you come to the bottom, all this local government, it’s just working together – us ordinary people, against the troubles that afflict all of us – poverty, ignorance, sickness, isolation – madness. And you can help us” (545).
Although at the end of Mrs. Beddows’s speech, Sarah is still mired in despair, the final scene of the novel shows the reader a revitalized Sarah, fresh from a nearly fatal plane crash, standing with her students at a Silver Jubilee. She has exhorted her students to question everything – the celebratory speeches, the prayers, even her own rules. As she listens to the ceremony taking place around her, she sees herself as part of a whole, and she revises the phrase that has been her motto throughout the novel--“Take what you want, said God: take it and pay for it”--with a new understanding: “we all pay, she thought; we all take; we are members one of another. We cannot escape this partnership. This is what it means – to belong to a community; this is what it means, to be a people” (562). Sarah sees herself suddenly as in debt to this community that she came from and has now returned to. Her vision of self-reliance has been altered by her experience with Carne, and it is not a moral transformation she has undergone, but a civic one.

Holtby’s use of the tested woman plot thus revises its central structures while deploying those structures just long enough to cue readers to expect them to be fulfilled. The non-fulfillment of these readerly expectations serves to underscore what, for Holtby, constituted problematic assumptions underpinning the tested woman plot. The central focus of the long social novel is a seemingly traditional love plot, but along the way, Holtby changes the focus of that plot, even killing the male protagonist so that all hope of a romantic ending is lost. In the end, Holtby has substituted a social plot for the romantic tested woman plot, and asserted the importance of civic duty and social connectedness over the moral imperative of a woman’s virtue. The actions that would have condemned
Sarah Burton in a traditional tested woman plot are precisely the actions that make her useful and motivated in the plot of social change that Holtby has covertly been writing. Holtby uses submerged experimentation to transform the tested woman plot over the course of the entire novel. By shifting the focus slowly, Holtby uses the tested woman plot, specifically the plot of *Jane Eyre*, as scaffolding that allows readers to construct a bridge from what they might expect from the novel to the reframing force Holtby wants her novel to have. In the period during which Holtby was writing, her own and other authors' novels were frequently dismissed as “merely social” novels – as in the Van Gelder review quoted above. In *South Riding*, Holtby is able to achieve the same aims as “so many diligent English women scholars [who] have plodded to laboriously to bring their social science research results to the fiction market,” while convincing readers that the novel is in fact a romance, as most critics and reviewers concluded it was (Van Gelder 21). Holtby creates a strong, aggressive, and outspoken female character, one who might only have been acceptable in a romance plot, and, by the end of the novel, removes all traces of romance – allowing the heroine to stand alone as the protagonist of a plot of progressive social change. Her subtle manipulations of familiar plot structures make her radical social vision more acceptable to a broad variety of readers, while remaining legible as subversive to those readers who are sensitive to the text's use of a doubly coded plot.

*Conclusion*
Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and Holtby’s *South Riding* both manipulate conventional and gendered plot structures. Wharton gives her tested “women” more control over their choices, which undermines the tested woman plot that would have a powerless protagonist. However, in the process of placing a male protagonist in the role of the tested woman, she also takes pains to show that his plight is not as dire as a woman’s would be in the same situation. Holtby, interestingly, makes more dramatic changes to the basic plot structure, but manages to keep her experimentation submerged by repeatedly invoking such a powerful plot structure, and in particular such a powerful representative example of that plot structure – *Jane Eyre*.

Both authors invoke powerfully modernist themes, such as the paralyzing force of convention and the need for social change. Both novels also radically alter the moral component of the tested woman plot, touching on it but also neutralizing it. In Wharton’s novel, the potential consequences of failing the tests are much less serious than in a traditional tested woman plot, particularly for a feminized modern man like Archer. In Holtby’s novel, this suggestion is taken even further, with Holtby implying that sexual “impurity” can serve the overall social good. Holtby combines this radical claim with a strong female character who is ultimately not judged on the basis of her sexual behavior but rather on her ability to effect social change, and who is able to escape from the traditional romance plot to take the lead role in another type of plot entirely. Both novels manipulate reader expectations about the conventional plot structures found in such novels as *House of Mirth* and *Jane Eyre*, but whereas Wharton’s experimentation
highlights gender dynamics in questions of morality, Holtby’s more covert experimentation shifts the focus from morality to the individual’s potential social worth.

1 The second usage of the term plot places the emphasis on how the events of the story are connected together, or “that combination of economy and sequencing of events that makes a story a story and not just raw material” (Abbott 43). This approach is indebted to Aristotle’s concept of a “fashioned story, shaped with a beginning, middle, and end” (43), and also to Paul Ricoeur’s ideas. The third use of the term discussed by Abbott is modeled on Genette’s work, and “features the way plot serves a story by departing from the chronological order of its events, or expanding on some events while rushing through others, or returning to them, sometimes repeatedly” (43).


4 It is also interesting to note, as Melanie Dawson does in her article, “Lily Bart’s Fractured Alliances and Wharton’s Appeal to the Middlebrow Reader,” that Wharton seems to purposefully construct The House of Mirth to appeal to a middlebrow audience. I would argue that the change in her status as a highbrow literary celebrity as well as the historic and cultural changes taking place around her changed the authorial audience of The Age of Innocence, resulting in a dual audience.

5 Lily is not always viewed as sympathetic. See, for example, Deborah G. Lambert, who argues that Wharton’s narrative stance keeps readers “at a great distance from [Lily], unable to participate in her fate or even feel compassion for her dilemma” (74). While I agree that Wharton’s narrative stance does undercut Lily’s goals, and introduces a moral duality, I believe the responses of critics and readers that Lambert herself surveys prove that Lily is a character readers sympathize with, even if they simultaneously judge her negatively (in some respects).

6 Of course, men also function as judges, most notably Selden, as well as Gryce and the other men who reject Lily. However, the most devastating social consequences are shown to be the results of the social judgments of women.

7 The narrative perspective is key here, because as the reader learns at the end of the novel, May is actually much more perceptive and worldly than Archer ever gives her
credit for. However, the judgment here is based on Archer’s point of view and therefore on Archer’s understanding of the two women.

8 There is one brief trial that involves Madame Olenska. It occurs when she first appears at the theater with the Wellands, and the men in Archer’s box debate her status, with one idealistic young man attempting to defend her for leaving her husband, and the rest of the men knowingly convicting her of improper conduct.

9 Heather Julien also notes the connections between South Riding and Jane Eyre, focusing on their representation of the spinster figure (as does most Holtby criticism). For other perspectives on South Riding, see: Alison Oram, “Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses” (1992), Ashlie Sponenberg, “The Long Arm of Discipline: South Riding, Documentary Writing, and the Cinematic Gaze” (2007), and Wendy Gan, “A Return to Romance: Winifred Holtby’s Spinster Novels from Between the Wars” (2003).

10 Interestingly, this criticism amounts to the opposite of that sometimes brought to bear on Edith Wharton. Critics of Wharton’s work frequently complimented her masterful use of technique while lamenting the coldness, or the lack of vitality, that she brought to her characters and stories.

11 Like Adele in Jane Eyre, Midge’s lineage is uncertain. In the last days of her madness before she was committed, Muriel claimed that Midge was not Robert’s daughter, but Robert nonetheless blames himself for Muriel’s breakdown, which he believes was caused by Muriel’s pregnancy. Holtby thus conflates the unfaithful French actress with Bertha Mason.

12 This is also part of her test: the temptation of the test is all the stronger because in order to resist it, she must abandon not only the familiar surroundings of Thornfield Hall, but most of her belongings, and even more importantly, her reputation. She feels that her virtue is so imperiled that she cannot take proper leave, and cannot allow Mr. Rochester to find out where she is, which means she has no way to find respectable employment on the strength of her experience.

13 In a survey of American library reading, Brontë ranked 137th among a group of 254 most frequently read library books. The list included contemporary bestsellers as well as classics, and Brontë outranked Rose Macaulay, Upton Sinclair, and Ernest Hemingway (Foster 169-174).
Conclusion

Beyond the Middlebrow: Submerged Experimentation and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*

This dissertation has argued that middlebrow modernist authors were not only aware of highbrow modernism, but actively engaged in incorporating modes of highbrow experimentalism into their works via submerged experimentation. I have examined the subtle yet subversive ways in which specific authors have transformed elements of theme, character, and plot. Placing these middlebrow texts in dialogue with highbrow texts exhibiting similar tendencies has allowed me to show the type of exchange that was taking place during the modernist period – an exchange that was far more reciprocal than has been recognized in previous studies of middlebrow modernism, or of modernism more generally, for that matter. In addition, my project, by focusing on the work of women middlebrow writers, contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to elaborate on the contribution that women in particular made to the development of modernism through their roles as editors, authors, artists, and publishers.

My dissertation, therefore, suggests the need to change how we view the culture of authorship in the modernist period. Modernist practices--in particular, modernist strategies for innovation and experimentalism at the level of content as well as form--
were much more widespread and influential than has been realized, and were put to a much wider range of uses than was previously thought. Rather than the exclusive province of a select group of the artistic elite, modernist experimentalism can be reconceived as a set of tools wielded by many authors with diverse backgrounds and aims. My study suggests how experimental techniques typically associated with highbrow authors were also in use in the middlebrow publishing world, and differed only in degree of visibility or overtness (rather than scope or extent) from those used by canonical modernists. Hence a focus on submerged experimentation allows us to uncover networks of influence and exchange within the modernist period, redefining modernism itself in the process.

While this project aimed for in-depth studies of individual middlebrow authors, my approach can be extended to address submerged experimentation in the Harlem renaissance, the avant-garde, the lowbrow, middlebrow genre fiction (such as the mystery novel), and the genres of poetry and drama. These remain productive avenues for future study, which will raise exciting new questions about how submerged experimentation functions within different publishing contexts, genres, and media. My work with contemporary reviews of both highbrow and middlebrow authors builds on the work of feminist narrative scholars, by answering the call for studies that are attentive to the actual publishing and reception environments of authors, and by providing evidence of actual reception (through reviewers and critics) of work published during the modernist period. This same approach, coupled with the attention to modes of formal and thematic
experimentation, can provide new insights into the reach of modernist practices across multiple domains of literary and cultural production.

In order to give a brief example of how using submerged experimentation as an interpretive lens might add to our understanding of texts in other categories than that of the middlebrow, I turn to Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. Using submerged experimentation as an interpretive lens can add to our understanding of *Passing* by enriching, not replacing, the analyses done by scholars like Peter Rabinowitz and Deborah E. McDowell. In my work on submerged experimentation, I have focused not just on elaborating the formally experimental qualities of works, but also on identifying texts from the same period that are engaged in similar experimental activities. Thus, examining *Passing* from the point of view of submerged experimentation will help establish connections to other authors and movements. In Larsen’s case, this would build on scholarship that views the Harlem Renaissance as a part of the modernist movement, rather than a completely separate phenomenon. But it would refine some of that scholarship by showing exactly how writers not normally associated with highbrow modernism nonetheless participated in modernist writing practices.

As Peter Rabinowitz’s analysis in “Betraying the Sender: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts” shows, *Passing* is a complex text with (at least) a dual audience. Rabinowitz shows how Larsen’s novel is an example not just of “social passing,” where the object is to “mislead people into thinking you are something you are not” (202), but also of “rhetorical passing,” which involves “a significantly more complex relationship
between passer and audience” (202). As Rabinowitz puts it, whereas social passing “doesn’t require that anyone other than the person passing know the truth—and in fact...works most efficiently when the secret is absolutely secure,” rhetorical passing is not simply a disguise, but a virtuoso tightrope performance” (202). Like rhetorical passing, submerged experimentation relies on the concept of a dual audience, but also requires putting Larsen’s text into conversation with other modernist texts.

To fully understand the significance of submerged experimentation in Passing, we need to observe how it works in tandem with texts like Woolf’s The Voyage Out, which also contains a submerged plot of lesbian sexual identity contained within a conventional marriage plot. In Mark Wollaeger’s essay, “The Woolfs in the Jungle: Intertextuality, Sexuality, and the Emergence of Female Modernism in The Voyage Out, The Village in the Jungle, and Heart of Darkness,” he reads the scene in The Voyage Out in which Helen runs after Rachel, knocks her to the ground, and rolls about on her, as “simultaneously lesbian, sororal, and maternal” (58). In addition, Helen’s embrace “moves Rachel in a way that Terence’s [her fiancé] kiss does not,” overwhelms Rachel to the point of confusion (59). This undercurrent of lesbian sexual desire is masked by the more traditionally heterosexual plot of Rachel’s personal growth and romantic involvement—that is, by the text’s overt participation in the genre of the female Bildungsroman.

My suggestion is that there is a clear connection between the undercurrent of lesbian desire and the manner in which it is concealed beneath a conventional romance.
plot (and Bildungsroman structure) in *The Voyage Out* and the double plot of *Passing*, which seems to be about racial passing but is also about repressed lesbian desire. A focus on submerged experimentation accentuates and provides new ways of investigating this sort of textual parallel, by suggesting hitherto unexplored interconnections among highbrow modernist narratives and other works published in other contexts and targeted and different audiences. In the opening pages of Larsen's novel, when Irene first reads the letter she receives from Clare, the reader’s lack of context – the reader does not yet know about Clare passing, or her desire to return to her people – makes the letter read like a love letter:

I am lonely, so lonely…cannot help longing to be with you, as I have never longed for anything before […] It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases […] and it’s your fault, ‘Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn’t now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn’t seen you that time in Chicago… (145)

The letter, and Irene’s response to it (“brilliant red patches flamed in Irene Redfield’s warm olive cheeks”), imply a romantic relationship of some sort, and lead the reader to believe that the encounter in Chicago was a passionate one. Here, the “reader” I am referring to—the one who draws inferences about a relationship between Irene and Clare—would have to be a member of Rabinowitz’s “discerning authorial audience”; members of the “gullible authorial audience” would either skip over the strangeness of the letter’s wording, or assume that it would be explained at some later point in the story.

When Irene’s desire surfaces elsewhere in the text, it is always in this same manner that can be overlooked by the gullible authorial audience and noticed by the
discerning authorial audience. Thus, when Irene is surprised and shocked by the thought that “in spite of her determined selfishness the woman before her [Clare] was yet capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. Indeed, never cared to know,” the discerning authorial audience can surmise that Clare represents the passion and desire that Irene represses because she considers safety and security all-important (195).

Like *The Voyage Out*, *Passing* conceals the lesbian desires of its protagonist beneath a seemingly conventional surface narrative. At the same time, both narratives end in ways that disrupt the conventional surface narrative. *The Voyage Out* ends with the death of the protagonist after she has gotten engaged, allowing Woolf to question the heteronormative effects of marriage in general, and of Rachel and Terence’s relationship in particular. *Passing* ends with the death of Clare Kendry, the circumstances of which are strongly hinted at but never clearly resolved. The narrative strongly implies that Irene pushes Clare from the window, but Larsen offers no definitive clues that would provide textual closure. Thus, although McDowell describes the novel’s structure as “neat and symmetrical,” and characterized by “order and control,” the lack of closure seems to indicate a less contained structure than McDowell sees. McDowell claims that the “novel performs a double burial: the erotic subplot is hidden beneath its safe and orderly cover and the radical implications of that plot are put away by the disposal of Clare” (xxx). By contrast, I would argue that the disposal of Clare accomplishes almost the opposite of what McDowell claims – the lack of closure that Clare’s death creates draws more
attention to the hidden plot and its radical implications, and makes it more likely that even the gullible authorial audience might notice it.

This reading of *Passing* suggests some of the parallels that exist between the types of submerged experimentation taking place in the Harlem Renaissance and the experimentation with sexual identity taking place in modernist culture more generally. A focus on submerged experimentation can thus establish--or clarify the nature and extent of--relationships and networks among texts and groups of texts within the modernist era. Indeed, this emphasis on connection-making is one of the things that distinguishes my approach from the approach that Rabinowitz develops in his discussion of texts that engage in rhetorical passing. While rhetorical passing deals primarily with the relationship between a text and its audiences in isolation from other texts, the study of submerged experimentation requires viewing the text in its material historical context and in relationship with other texts, both literary and extra-literary. In addition, while the relationship between the implied author and the audience might sometimes be the same in submerged experimentation as it is in rhetorical passing, it might also differ. In some cases, the authorial audience might start out as gullible and only slowly become discerning; in other words, the authorial audience would slowly become able to discern the experimentation in the text. Submerged experimentation can therefore encompass a wider range of potential authorial and audience positions than rhetorical passing. Thus, a focus on submerged experimentation can enrich rhetorical narrative theory, in addition to feminist narratology and the study of middlebrow modernist culture.
Indeed, one of the unexpected findings of my project is the extent to which the authors and works I have included as case studies are interconnected. While highbrow modernist writers communicated with (and read) one another, making connections among them predictably pervasive, I have been amazed by the number and variety of connections among the disparate authors across the middlebrow / highbrow “divide.”

Arguably, as the submerged experimentation in middlebrow, lowbrow and Harlem Renaissance works becomes more visible, our understanding of highbrow modernist experimentation will require a readjustment in turn—to capture the full range of modes of experimentation occurring across gender, racial, and class boundaries in the first half of the twentieth century.

1 This and other scenes in the novel are analyzed in more detail by Patricia Smith in “‘The Things People Don’t Say’: Lesbian Panic in The Voyage Out.”

2 These connections aren’t exclusively related to experimentation. For example, Margaret Ayer Barnes adapted Wharton’s The Age of Innocence for the stage, and Winifred Holtby wrote an acclaimed biography of Virginia Woolf.
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