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E.M. Delafield and the
feminist middlebrow

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

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Summary

This thesis investigates the interaction between the categories of the middlebrow and feminism in the novels of E.M. Delafield (1890-1943). Selecting works for detailed scrutiny from the full range of Delafield's published fiction, I evaluate the expression of feminist meaning in a cultural form that often evinces both formal and social conservatism. I build on Nicola Humble's construction of the feminine middlebrow, a category of interwar twentieth century writing concerned with women's lives, sometimes disruptive in terms of content, but traditional in form. I also develop notions of the middlebrow as hybrid and mutable to support my argument for the establishment of a category of the feminist middlebrow: texts that articulate feminist meaning while retaining palatability, in terms of both form and content, for a large and politically mainstream audience.

I argue that Delafield makes use of various constructions of ambiguity within her fiction to assert, and often simultaneously obscure, her feminist meaning. These ambiguous forms include the extensive use of irony, elision of the boundaries between author and protagonist, use of comedy to distract from disruptive meaning, developing marginal characters to carry feminist ideas, and a complex representation of female subjectivity and interiority. Delafield's use of ambiguity allows her to continue to advance feminist arguments, sometimes radical in their implications, without disturbing readerly pleasure in her middlebrow texts; it allows her to speak to a number of potential audiences, those engaged with feminism, those sympathetic to its aims, and those antipathetic, and to create fiction that remains palatable to all those audiences. This privileging of the reader, I argue, creates an intersubjective and democratic approach in which readers articulate feminist meaning in texts, and which plays a crucial part in constructing the category of the feminist middlebrow.

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Introduction

The novels and short stories of E.M. Delafield exemplify the ambiguities of the fiction of the interwar period. Her work has been characterised as feminist and as non-feminist; her novels generally focus on women's lives, and explore subjects also of concern to contemporary feminists, but often avoid overt feminist conclusion. Delafield is now usually considered a middlebrow writer, and she was avowedly opposed to textual innovation; in its time, however, her work was nonetheless considered to be of high literary quality and significance. She is most famous for her comic and satirical work, but also produced novels that addressed serious and sometimes tragic matters. The volume and diversity of her work, both in form and in content, has made it difficult to generalise about its literary meaning and import. In this thesis I scrutinise works from the full range of Delafield's fiction in order to evaluate her position as both a feminist and a middlebrow writer, and consider the effect on the meaning of her work of the interrelationship of these two categories.

I argue that Delafield's novels make use of ambiguity both to express feminist meaning and to maintain the palatability of the text for a conservative middlebrow audience. While Delafield publicly committed herself to realism in her fiction and rejected the types of formal experimentation that characterise modernist texts, I argue that she made use of various formal approaches within the constraints of realism to construct this ambiguity in order to express both feminist and traditional meanings about women's lives. These diverse formal approaches include allusion, distraction, irony, subversion, the use of marginal plots or characters, and the elision of the author and her protagonist; all these approaches create ambiguity about what is meant, what is important and where the boundary lies between the real and the fictional. I argue that Delafield's use of these forms of ambiguity allow her to express her feminist meaning even while the text appears to efface it, creating paradoxically ambiguous works that can be read as both anti-feminist and, sometimes radically, pro-feminist. The use of ambiguity can be detected throughout Delafield's fiction and I therefore argue that it can be read as an intentional strategy on the part of the author to allow her the means of expressing feminist ideas within her novels; however, I demonstrate that many of her feminist readings are emergent and depend on the attentiveness and political sympathies of the reader. Recent criticism on the category of the middlebrow has identified the ways in which the identification of a text as middlebrow is dependent on the perceived status of the reader; I argue that the feminist middlebrow status of Delafield's work is constructed in part through the political persuasions of the individual reader.

This thesis focuses primarily on Delafield's published fiction, drawing on her published journalism and archival materials where appropriate, and considers her work in its social, political, historical and literary context. Delafield published 29 novels and several collections of short stories, and I include in this thesis a selection of works from across the full span of her writing

career, as well as identifying comparator authors among interwar English women writers. While Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) and its sequels have received substantial critical attention as exemplars of women's middlebrow writing, this thesis goes beyond extant critical work on Delafield by interrogating a much wider range of texts, and by analysing the expression of feminism throughout her published fiction. I also provide an original analysis of the complex interactions between Delafield's commitment to realism, her status as a writer of middlebrow fiction, and her expression of feminist political meaning, and the ways in which this meaning is constructed and expressed through ambiguity. This analysis contributes to critical understanding of the middlebrow category and the way in which it can be used to express apparently unlikely political meaning in texts which appear superficially conservative in terms of both form and content; it also supports the construction of the middlebrow reader as a vital and active contributor to definitions of literary status and meaning.

Delafield and the middlebrow

Delafield has been strongly identified with the middlebrow both by her contemporaries and by more recent critics. During the interwar period, the category of the middlebrow was developed by commentators such as F.R. Leavis, Q.D. Leavis and Virginia Woolf to contain and delineate in particular the type of mass-market literary fiction that aspired to, or encroached on, the status of high culture. It was strongly associated with the increasingly powerful middle class, and the new mechanisms of literary circulation such as libraries and book clubs. For interwar critics middlebrow fiction was defined by its lack of seriousness and authenticity, by a use of content and form that failed to challenge the reader, by its soothing and palliative qualities, and, most significantly, by the class of those who read and wrote middlebrow works. Q.D. Leavis provided perhaps the most developed definition of middlebrow fiction in the interwar period: *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) sets out a stratified model of literary culture, each layer (highbrow, middlebrow literary, lower middlebrow and popular) supported by its own industrial structure of book societies, libraries, publishers and literary journals and reviews.¹ Leavis is particularly exercised by the lack of seriousness in middlebrow literary fiction; this category comes closest to the territory occupied by highbrow fiction, and competes for the same audience.² She detects a particular tone, a "suburban idiom", which defines the language used to construct middlebrow fiction and gives it the inauthenticity Leavis deplores. In a footnote, she cites Delafield as an example of this middlebrow idiom:

The Suburban Young Man and other novels of E.M. Delafield (popular circulating library fiction) are excellent illustrations of the idiom of that life, in which everything said has a stale flavour of having been acquired from the newspaper or magazine.³

¹ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), p7

² Leavis, p46

³ Leavis, p210

Delafield was perhaps unlucky to have *The Suburban Young Man* (1928) singled out for comment in this way; she herself regretted the publication of this novel, which she wrote in seven weeks.⁴ As well as acting as an identified source of the “suburban idiom”, Delafield’s works fit Leavis’s model of the middlebrow in a number of other ways. Her books were indeed popular with the circulating libraries; they were reviewed by periodicals that Leavis identifies as supporting the production of middlebrow cultural products, such as the *Times Literary Supplement*;⁵ they were serialised in magazines and newspapers, acquiring an association with the commodification of literature;⁶ and, when the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* was published in 1930, Delafield’s works began to be issued by the Book Society and similar organisations.⁷ *The Suburban Young Man* might have drawn Leavis’s attention partly because of its theme, which is not dissimilar to that of *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Its writer-protagonist, Peter Jannett, is a product of the suburbs striving to produce better work; eventually, through his connection with the upper-class Antoinette Rochester, he begins to achieve an authenticity in his writing that has previously eluded him. The novel couches this as a result of his experience of genuine love for Antoinette rather than his exposure to highbrow culture, and indeed only Antoinette of her circle has any particular interest in literature. Leavis may have detected the “suburban idiom” in the parodic portrayal of Peter’s family, in particular his vulgar sister-in-law Norah, whose negative characteristics are emphasised to provide contrast with the sensitive Peter, his thoughtful and generous wife Hope, and the integrity of Antoinette. The end of the novel suggests that good literature may yet emerge from suburbia – a suggestion presumably anathema to Leavis – even though the love between Peter and Antoinette cannot conquer the class boundary that divides them. *The Suburban Young Man* might not be the best of Delafield’s fiction, but it is exemplary of her work in thematic terms, engaging with issues of class, reading and writing, domesticity and maternity, and gender roles. This thematic focus aligns Delafield’s work with Leavis’s category of middlebrow fiction in the same way as the means by which her works were distributed, whether or not Leavis’s criticism of the idiom of the novel is accepted.

More recent critical work on the middlebrow confirms Leavis’s categorisation in terms of class, economic, and formal characteristics. Rosa Maria Bracco posits a middlebrow that, while it “mediated between conflicts and extremes” both in terms of form and content, was inherently conservative:

⁴ E.M. Delafield, ‘A Note by the Way’ in *Ten Contemporaries: Notes Toward Their Definitive Bibliography* ed. by John Gawsorth (London Joiner and Steele, 1933), pp121-122 (p122)

⁵ Leavis, p20. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewed Delafield’s novels throughout her writing career from the appearance of *The War-Workers* in 1918.

⁶ Delafield’s fiction appeared in serial form in the *Daily Mirror* as well as in *Time and Tide* and *Punch*. See E.M. Delafield, ‘What is Love?’ *Daily Mirror*, 25 June 1921, pp21-22

⁷ E.M. Delafield, ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’ in *Titles to Fame* ed. by Denys Kilham Roberts (Thomas Nelson and Sons: London, 1937), pp 121-138 (p129)

One role of middlebrow literature in the interwar years was to keep the canon of nineteenth-century fiction, as it understood it, aligned and functioning by safeguarding it against modernism. While it acknowledged and described disorientation and loss of religious belief in the face of social change, it ultimately reaffirmed historical continuity and the coherence of faith [...]. Middlebrow fiction [...] attempted to establish continuity not with great literature but with the past; [middlebrow authors] employed the nineteenth-century structure of well-rounded narratives, with clearly structured plots and definite endings, and they assumed the presence of an audience bound up by a community of values.⁸

Bracco, in the context of fiction dealing with the First World War, suggests that middlebrow fiction is “softening the impact of the break” with nineteenth-century values by “imply[ing] the possibility of readjusting the various parts and making them whole again”.⁹ This restorative function applies, Bracco suggests, as much to content as to form, with 1920s middlebrow fiction giving accounts of

one or more individuals and their - almost always - successful attempts to deal with certain difficulties in their lives. Their struggles, however, transcended the limits of a purely domestic scene, as the over-coming of personal dilemmas always involved the solutions of tensions arising from wider social problems. This ‘solution’ consisted of the re-assertion of those values which appeared to be threatened by contemporary change and served to provide a less painful transition into the new post-war world.¹⁰

Delafield’s ambiguous middlebrow fictions of feminism demonstrate elements of Bracco’s definition: usually formally similar to nineteenth-century novels, they perform the task of reassurance of the reader through their formal approach and through narratives of socially disruptive matters that are predominantly conservative in tone. Her narratives of the difficulties of individual women’s lives certainly explore “tensions arising from wider social problems” but the idea that her works demonstrate a resolution of these problems, reinforcing older, more familiar values, is disrupted by Delafield’s stories of women’s difficulties that end in tragic rather than transcendent or compromised circumstances.

David Ayers’s examination of popular fiction of the 1920s supports the idea of a predominantly conservative middlebrow and stresses the importance of such conservatism to the middlebrow’s palliative effect, suggesting that popular novels, whose contents comprise “variously, moralism, escapism and titillation, [...] do, however, attempt to sustain a climate of general acquiescence and incuriosity in a time of great uncertainty and potential for massive change”.¹¹ However, I argue that Delafield, through her use of ambiguity, does not necessarily assume the “community of values” ascribed to middlebrow writing by Bracco; her novels establish instead various possibilities of meaning, the understanding and appreciation of which will depend on the values and opinions of the reader. They retain the palliative conservatism identified as a

⁸ Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939* (Providence/Oxford: Berg, 1993), p12

⁹ Bracco, *Merchants of Hope*, pp12-13

¹⁰ Rosa Maria Bracco, *Between and Between: Middlebrow Fiction and English Society in the Twenties and Thirties* (University of Melbourne, History Department, 1990), p15

¹¹ David Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p4

middlebrow characteristic by Leavis, Bracco and Ayers, but also establish marginal or subversive radical meanings. Delafield's writing therefore remains within the middlebrow category but points to a more flexible and adaptive definition of the middlebrow than many critics suggest.

Alison Light also constructs the middlebrow as conservative, but notes that conservatism may be "a matter of temperament as well as particular views on public affairs" which has "faith in the possibility of "magically invisible change";¹² she also argues for the adaptability of middlebrow conservatism which can "hold on to the mainstays of a conservative frame of mind [...] whilst simultaneously updating it".¹³ The ambiguous blend of conservative reassurance and subversive radicalism in Delafield's fiction demonstrates how such works can shore up established values while considering the possibilities of change. Other critics build on the possibilities of an adaptive middlebrow suggested by Light. Erica Brown and Mary Grover emphasise the slippery nature of definitions of the middlebrow: "a product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority, it is itself unstable".¹⁴ Middlebrow fiction, defined by a varied and variable readership as much as by its formal approach and content, may then open up the possibility of expressing a variety of meanings, possibly only detectable to certain sections of its audience and dependent upon their willingness as readers to engage with such meanings.

Nicola Humble also defines the middlebrow as flexible and mutable: the concept is "fluid" for today's critics and "always was", with the boundaries between the brows "nebulous".¹⁵ Some of this fluidity and flexibility arises from the fact that the categorisation of a text as middlebrow is established by the nature of its readers:

For many that applied the term, one suspects that the central tenet that allowed the novel to be dismissed as middlebrow was the issue of whom it was read by; once a novel became widely popular, it became suspect, and bestseller status, or adoption as a Book-of-the-Month choice by a major book club was sufficient to demote it beneath serious attention. A novel was therefore middlebrow not because of any intrinsic content, but because it was widely read by the middle-class public - and particularly by the lower middle classes.¹⁶

Through engagement with the criticism of Q.D. Leavis, Cyril Connolly and George Orwell, Humble detects the interrelationship of the middlebrow with the highbrow, and the ways in which these critics display a desire to differentiate and defend highbrow culture from the encroachments of popular culture, in particular middlebrow literary fiction which "most seriously threatened to encroach on the space that [Leavis] and her fellow dons were meticulously clearing for the

¹² Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp212-213

¹³ Light, pp214-215

¹⁴ Erica Brown and Mary Grover, 'Introduction: Middlebrow Matters' in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: the Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp1-21 (p2)

¹⁵ Nicola Humble, 'Sitting Forward and Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading' *Modernist Cultures*, 6, 1 (2011) 41-59 (p42)

¹⁶ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p13. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

occupation of certifiable literature” (18-19). Humble identifies that Leavis’s arguments in particular are founded on class, since the middlebrow is such an adaptive and fluid category that it can only be defined by the nature of its readers: “middlebrow cultural objects are illegitimate not because of any intrinsic qualities, but simply *because* they are to the taste of the middle class” (20). This identification allows Humble to posit the middlebrow as a cultural construct rather than a formal or generic category, a construct established by the machinery of book production which allowed the identification of usually female middle-class readers who were library and book society members (28-29). In arguing for a distinctive *feminine* middlebrow, Humble suggests that there are a body of works largely “read by and addressed to women” and that these comprise the greater part of middlebrow fiction (14). For Humble, it is precisely because women read these books “that they were downgraded at the time and subsequently seen as so insignificant” (14). In re-evaluating the value and significance of middlebrow fiction, Humble argues that the feminine middlebrow in particular was “a powerful force in establishing and consolidating, but also in resisting, new class and gender identities, and that it is its paradoxical allegiance to both domesticity and a radical sophistication that makes this literary form so ideologically flexible”. (3) While middlebrow fiction pays “obsessive” detail, for example, to class markers, it is also a space in which contesting views of middle-classness can be debated and new ideas of middle-class identity formed: “Its feyness and frivolity and its flexible generic boundaries allowed it to explore new gender and sexual identities which were otherwise perceived as dangerously disruptive of social values.” (4) Humble also evaluates feminine middlebrow novels that are minutely observant of class difference and continue to construct and maintain social snobberies, and concludes that there is a central ambiguity in the treatment of class:

The feminine middlebrow emerges as fundamentally ambivalent about middle-classness. One of the strongest defenders of an upper-middle-class value system, part of its popularity as a literary form was due to the fact that it provided a means for the excluded to acquire crucial signifiers of belonging. Its snobberies are presented as a guilty pleasure, and its encoding of class values makes the reader who cracks the codes complicit. Yet even in the 1930s and 1950s, when fear of the encroaching lower middle class was at its height, these novels retain some distance from their own reactionariness, opening up spaces from which we can view their exclusions and games of one-upmanship as cruel and pointless [...] they offer a temporary palliation of the real-life stresses produced by continued class-consciousness, by allowing every reader the satisfactions of being upper middle class. (107)

The ambivalence about class that Humble detects in the feminine middlebrow applies equally to the other thematic areas she discusses. Delafield typifies this approach throughout her work, which constructs subversive and ambiguous arguments about gender, family relationships, work and sexuality. In her later essay on camp and the middlebrow, Humble suggests that the

double lens of this camp vision is one of the key ways [...] in which middlebrow fiction manages to negotiate the prickly terrain between high and low culture; the way in which it wrong-foots those who would seek to dismiss it; how it gets to have it both ways.¹⁷

¹⁷ Nicola Humble, ‘The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow’ in *Middlebrow Literary*

Erica Brown, in her work on middlebrow comedy, builds on Humble's model of the "double lens", arguing that Elizabeth Taylor and Elizabeth von Arnim use "those elements that have given them the [middlebrow] label – domestic setting, concern with courtship and marriage, the 'lucid' prose and wit [...] to create complex and challenging novels",¹⁸ deploying a narrative strategy in which the use of a particular form, the ironic comedy of manners, allows the expression of social criticism.¹⁹ As I shall show, throughout her novels, whether they express humour or not, Delafield's fiction constructs a middlebrow "double lens" in order to "have it both ways" and express ambiguous meaning which can soothe the "real-life stresses" and express social criticism arising from the social changes effected by the new possibilities for women during the interwar period; I argue that her work makes use of both the ideological flexibility and the opportunity to engage with disruptive themes and issues that writing for a middlebrow audience provided. Humble has emphasised that texts themselves are not inherently middlebrow; rather, they "move at certain moments in their social history" into the category of the middlebrow.²⁰ This may be because, like Delafield's work, texts exhibit many of the "common features" that, Humble argues, cause a text to be admitted to the middlebrow category.²¹ It may also be because of the pleasure with which they are read. Humble has written of the association between middlebrow fiction and "leisure and relaxation, [and] the pleasure of the reader"; middlebrow texts themselves represent the reader of middlebrow fiction as deriving "bodily and readerly pleasures" from engagement with the text.²²

Throughout this thesis I will work with a model of the middlebrow category which is related to the status of a text as perceived, at the time of publication and subsequently, to its audience and the potential for that audience to derive pleasure from that text; to the realism of that text; and to the thematic interests of that text, including when those themes are disruptive. Humble has suggested that the middlebrow category "fizzles out" in the 1950s because it is "only a useful category when it's irritating or shameful to some people".²³ The idea of the middlebrow as an irritant or a provocation gives it an unexpected affinity with the position of interwar feminism, a feminism which continued to fight battles on behalf of women when many in the mainstream considered the war had been won.

Delafield, feminism and women in the interwar period

Interwar feminism in England consisted of sustained, if fragmented, campaigning to redress persistent inequalities until universal suffrage was achieved in 1928; after this achievement,

Cultures: the Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960 ed by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp218-229 (p222)

¹⁸ Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), p15

¹⁹ Brown, p19

²⁰ Elke D'hoker, 'Theorizing the Middlebrow. An interview with Nicola Humble', *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interférences*, 7 (2009), 259-265 (p260)

²¹ D'hoker, p261

²² Humble, 'Sitting Forward and Sitting Back', p50

²³ D'hoker, p262

momentum decreased and feminist activism dissipated.²⁴ For feminists of the 1920s, the militancy that had characterised women's suffrage campaign was no longer necessary and might even be counter-productive;²⁵ suffrage groups adapted their names and their policies to allow campaigning for a more diverse programme of change that would benefit women.²⁶ Feminists used their new-found political powers to engage with the political process and campaign for legislative change.²⁷ However, they did so in the face of a commitment to a continuation or reassertion of traditional gender roles following the First World War.

The War had been the occasion of disruptive changes to the social position of women. The prevailing Victorian ideology of 'separate spheres', in which women occupied a private, domestic sphere, closed off from the male, public world, was necessarily challenged by the need for gender roles to adapt to the requirements of the war effort. However, historians tend to agree that beliefs about gender roles persisted despite the participation of women in war work and other roles outside of the home.²⁸ The changes to women's lives were, it was persistently emphasised, temporary.²⁹ Women undertook work specifically generated by the war, such as the increased volume of administrative work required by the government; or, and definitely 'for the duration only', they undertook work that had previously been performed by men.³⁰ Particular constraints were placed on work that challenged gender roles. Women's military and police organisations who wore uniforms and drilled their recruits were "seen to be undermining the role and reputation of the male combatants whilst at the same time attempting to take advantage of wartime conditions in order to achieve their pre-war aim of female suffrage, an aim which was seen by many conservative critics as challenging and subverting the natural order".³¹ Women who did take on work previously performed by men were subject to limitations of pay and the practice of 'dilution', restructuring of men's jobs to ensure that only part of a job could be performed by a woman worker.³² Access to work for mothers, or access to work that might affect women's fertility or maternal instinct, continued to be restricted.³³ The national need for workers was constantly balanced against the need to preserve women's feminine status and normative gender roles.

²⁴ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1999* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000 (2nd edition)), p235

²⁵ Pugh, p50

²⁶ For example, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies became the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship. Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p183

²⁷ Caine, *English Feminism*, p184

²⁸ Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London, Pandora Press, 1987), p2

²⁹ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) p138

³⁰ Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I* (London: I B Tauris, 2000), pp30-31

³¹ Lucy Noakes, 'Eve in Khaki: Women Working with the British Military, 1915-1918' in *Women and Work Culture: Britain c.1850-1950* ed. by Krista Cowman and Louise A. Jackson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp213-228 (pp215-216)

³² Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) p138

³³ Thom, pp30-31

It is therefore unsurprising that efforts were made to restore gender normativity after the disruption of war; these efforts included demobilisation of women workers, limiting of access to unemployment benefit for women, and policies that amounted almost to conscription of working-class women into domestic service.³⁴ As Barbara Caine suggests, the mainstream view was that

[f]ar from demonstrating the possibilities for women to manage both family life and paid employment, the war suggested rather that this was possible only during an emergency, and that once 'normal life' was resumed, the family and its welfare should become the chief concern of women.³⁵

As well as valorising motherhood, this position legitimised gender and marriage bars in industry and the professions, and contributed to the demonisation of the unmarried woman.³⁶ Ray Strachey, reflecting on the achievements of post-war feminism in 1928, considers that in 1918 "[p]ublic opinion assumed that all women could still be supported by men, and that if they went on working it was from a sort of deliberate wickedness" but also notes women's own ambivalence about any permanent change to gender roles:

The women themselves acquiesced in the situation. They did not want to stand in the way of the returned soldiers, and, far from being the selfish creatures the Press described, they were only too meek and yielding [...] allowing the old rigid exclusions to be reimposed because they thought it was their duty.³⁷

Feminist campaigners worked within this context, attempting to address the needs of all women, and this involved the negotiation of meaning of sexual difference in terms of daily lives, political ideas and notions of women's citizenship, building on the political opportunities created by the extension of the franchise.³⁸ Attempting to speak to all women sometimes involved compromises with gender normativity; interwar feminist campaigning and achievements were, as Caine identifies, closely linked to motherhood and family life, or to a sexual liberation that intensified compulsory heterosexuality, with motherhood and happy marriage being the only forms of fulfilment acceptable to women even within feminist discourse.³⁹ These compromises could lead to a blurring of the boundaries between feminists and anti-feminists: the feminist Maude Royden, who had previously argued strongly that there was no essential difference between men and women, constructed a "new feminist version of separate spheres for men and women" which insisted on difference and "circumscribed the roles, activities and possibilities for women";⁴⁰ Vera Brittain argued for greater freedom and opportunities for women within marriage, hoping that the institution could become "a

³⁴ Pugh, pp80-83

³⁵ Caine, *English Feminism*, p182

³⁶ Caine, *English Feminism*, pp180-181

³⁷ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: Virago, 1978 (1928)) p371

³⁸ Caine, *English Feminism*, p175

³⁹ Caine, *English Feminism*, p175

⁴⁰ Susan Kingsley Kent, 'Gender Reconstruction after the First World War' in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* ed by Harold L Smith (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990) pp66-83 (pp79-80)

happy comradeship based on mutual confidence and respect”⁴¹ and she opined privately to her husband that “one happily married wife and mother is worth more to feminism ... than a dozen gifted and eloquent spinsters”.⁴² For many interwar feminists, rejecting any sort of militant approach and working within the limitations of social constructions of gender could, as Martin Pugh suggests, seem an effective way of moving towards gender equality.⁴³

Similarly, the government and other socially powerful institutions were not necessarily opposed to changes which improved equality and opportunities for women, in part perhaps because of the need to appeal to a new electorate that included women voters. The extension of the franchise to all women over 21 was enacted in 1928 despite a sustained campaign by the *Daily Mail* over a number of years against what they patronisingly called the ‘flapper vote’.⁴⁴ Ray Strachey notes successes in changing legislation or practice following 1920s feminist campaigns in a wide number of areas: access for women to university degrees; the Matrimonial Causes Act 1923 which established equality in terms of grounds for divorce; the Criminal Justice Act 1926 which removed the presumption that a woman committing a crime in the presence of her husband must have been coerced by him, constituting wives more fully as legal individuals; the legal establishment of the profession of midwife; and legislative and policy changes regarding the guardianship and adoption of children, widows’ pensions, and maternity homes.⁴⁵ The legislation to establish and regulate midwifery as a profession is a good example of the ambiguous achievements of 1920s feminist campaigning. This can be read as a feminist success that created new opportunities for women and improved the status of midwives, with the likely consequence of improving their pay and access to education; improving midwifery also specifically benefits women. It can also be read as a reinforcement of proper feminine roles; if women must work, they should do so in acceptably domestic settings with a focus on the care of other women and children. Working within the constraints of normative femininity, it is unsurprising that interwar feminism became diverse and occasionally conflicted.

Most accounts of feminist activity between the wars are agreed that divisions arose between groups of campaigners: those characterised as equality feminists, campaigning for greater equality and legislative change and centred around the Six Point Group established in 1920 by Lady Rhondda, later editor of *Time and Tide*; and those characterised as difference or new feminists, centred around the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) under the presidency of Eleanor Rathbone, interested in changes that would specifically address the particular needs of women.⁴⁶ Historians have positioned these two loose groupings as oppositional;⁴⁷

⁴¹ Vera Brittain, ‘Keeping His Love’, *Manchester Guardian* 29 November 1929

⁴² Vera Brittain, letter to George Catlin quoted in Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (London: Virago, 2001) p235. Ellipsis in original.

⁴³ Pugh, p50

⁴⁴ Pugh, pp112-113

⁴⁵ Strachey, pp382-383

⁴⁶ Harold L Smith, ‘British Feminism in the 1920s’ in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* ed. by Harold L. Smith (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990) pp47-65, (p50)

however, many key policy objectives were common to both groups.⁴⁸ The Six Point Group's focus, at its 1921 inception, was on legal and political action to achieve six feminist goals;⁴⁹ these included "legislation on child assault, protection for widowed mothers with young children and improved rights for the unmarried mother and child. Equal rights for men and women were demanded in the guardianship of parents, teachers' pay and opportunities in the civil service."⁵⁰ NUSEC's programme focussed more on social reform; in 1919 it defined its goals as "equal suffrage; an equal moral standard; promotion of the candidature of women for Parliament; equal pay for equal work and equality in industry and the professions; widows' pensions and equal guardianship; and active support for the League of Nations and of the practical application of the principle of equal opportunity within it".⁵¹

The commonality of the two groups' areas of interest is evident, but their priorities diverged more as the 1920s progressed: by the mid-twenties, the Six Point Group was "concentrating more and more on legal and economic equality", while NUSEC became "increasingly concerned about the status and welfare of wives and mothers [...] and] questions of family endowment and birth control".⁵² In 1926 these differences were played out in media debates about the nature of feminism. NUSEC's journal *The Woman's Leader* countered the Six Point Group's model of equality feminism with that of new feminism, defined as "the demand of women that the whole structure and movement of society shall reflect in a proportionate degree their experiences".⁵³ Winifred Holtby commented that, while the aims of new feminism seemed "more tolerant, sane and far-sighted",⁵⁴ it gave too much attention to 'sex differentiation', a concept which "not only checks the development the woman's personality, but prevents her from making that contribution to the common good which is the privilege and the obligation of every human being".⁵⁵ Holtby places herself firmly in the equality feminist camp, arguing that its specific focus on the promotion of equality, its 'definite object', make it more likely to succeed.⁵⁶ A *Time and Tide* editorial went further, arguing that the membership and the leadership of NUSEC now included "a considerable number of people to whom feminism is by no means of the first importance".⁵⁷ This debate was, as Barbara Caine argues, more than an argument over the 'real' meaning of feminism; it had an "important strategic function" as both groups attempted to appeal to potential members and

⁴⁷ Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', p48

⁴⁸ Pugh, p240

⁴⁹ Caine, *English Feminism*, p184

⁵⁰ Angela V John, *Turning the Tide: the Life of Lady Rhondda* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), p368

⁵¹ Caine, *English Feminism*, pp183-184

⁵² Caine, *English Feminism*, p187

⁵³ Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p190

⁵⁴ Winifred Holtby, 'Feminism Divided' in *Testament of a Generation: the Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* ed. by Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp47-40 (47). The article was published in the *Yorkshire Post* on 26 July 1926 and reprinted in *Time and Tide* on 6 August 1926.

⁵⁵ Holtby, 'Feminism Divided', p48

⁵⁶ Holtby, 'Feminism Divided', pp48-49

⁵⁷ *Time and Tide*, 5 March 1926, quoted in John, *Lady Rhondda*, p378

voters.⁵⁸ As Caine identifies, both groups faced difficulties in this area: equality feminism's focus on political and legislative change could seem dry and uninteresting, while new feminism's concentration on the position of mothers relegated "working women and women's work to a secondary place".⁵⁹

These varieties of feminism were underpinned by assumptions about gender, gender roles and choices, and pragmatic political priorities; they were also partially defined by class. Equality feminism was characterised as middle-class in terms of membership and policy, while new feminist campaigners sought to attract working-class women members through their policies and organisational structure.⁶⁰ The class-based focus of equality feminist campaigning is evident in the majority of Delafield's fiction, which deals with the position of ordinary, but definitely middle-class women, and gives sparse and often negative focus to the position of working-class women, particularly domestic servants. The Provincial Lady's servant troubles are part of Delafield's representation of the comic tribulations of a middle-class professional woman, but the Provincial Lady is unable to demonstrate empathy with her servants. Rather, she fears their power, and seeks to contain it: finding her temporary house-parlourman unwell, she tells him to "Go and be it in your own room."⁶¹ The working class, in Delafield's fiction, are often aligned or included among those who would constrain or limit the freedom and opportunity of her female protagonists; her arguments in favour of greater freedom for women are nearly always focused on the freedoms of middle-class women.

Violet Powell's biography of Delafield is not explicit about her feminist opinions or about interwar feminism in general, noting merely that *Time and Tide* initially had "a policy of supporting feminist causes" but that "the tide of time deflected the magazine" from its feminist goals.⁶² Powell does, however, note that Delafield was in favour of the education of girls by professional teachers rather than governesses,⁶³ and that, in her London flat, she appeared determined "to free herself from domestic shackles", not even possessing a kettle.⁶⁴ Maurice McCullen characterises Delafield's journalism as having a "feminist bias"⁶⁵ and suggests she creates a "popular feminist perspective" in the light short fiction she produced for *Time and Tide*,⁶⁶ but goes on to argue that she "never took part in any feminist movement, nor did she ever articulate feminist doctrine".⁶⁷ Setting aside the difficulty of defining feminist doctrine in the complex world of interwar feminism discussed above, McCullen's suggestion is contradicted by Delafield's position on the editorial

⁵⁸ Caine, *English Feminism*, p190

⁵⁹ Caine, *English Feminism*, p191

⁶⁰ Pugh, p99

⁶¹ E.M. Delafield, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (London: Macmillan, 1931 (1930)), p128

⁶² Violet Powell, *The Life of a Provincial Lady: a Study of E.M. Delafield and Her Works* (London: Heinemann, 1988) p74

⁶³ Powell, p113

⁶⁴ Powell, p98

⁶⁵ Maurice L. McCullen, *E.M. Delafield* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), p42

⁶⁶ McCullen, p44

⁶⁷ McCullen, p120

board of *Time and Tide*, during her lifetime an explicitly feminist journal, and by her journalism. A provocatively titled *Daily Mail* article, 'I am So Often Annoyed by Women', argues against the expectation that women should be solely interested in "the personal element", a focus that causes women to waste "not only their own opportunities, but those of other women" and urges women to consider the "plenty of other things, just as well worth doing" as "pleasing a husband and being useful to him";⁶⁸ a later article encourages girls to develop their skills and attributes rather than passively waiting for a man to propose to them.⁶⁹ A parody of Beverley Nichols's *Women and Children Last* (1931) in *Time and Tide* satirises Nichols's anti-feminism by suggesting that he advocates financial abuse, marital violence, and reminding wives daily that they are ageing as methods of securing a happy marriage.⁷⁰ An account of her work as a magistrate showed how Delafield resisted the efforts of her male colleagues encouraging her to avoid sitting on the bench to hear 'unpleasant' cases; with female solidarity, she explains that it seemed to her important that the victims in such cases, nearly always women and girls, should not have to give evidence to an all-male group of magistrates.⁷¹ Delafield's journalism often expresses a position closely related to that of interwar equality feminism, promoting equality of opportunity and encouraging an expanded and expansive social role for women; this reading of her feminism is underlined by her association with *Time and Tide*, and also by some of her personal choices, particularly the education of her daughter and her development of her career both for the purposes of self-fulfilment and to support her family, giving her a position of equal economic importance with her husband.

Delafield explores notions of gender roles and equality of opportunity in the themes of her fiction; however, her work also embodies contemporary debate about the focus of feminism, in particular the nature of motherhood and the needs of mothers in the context of works engaging with notions of equality. *Faster! Faster!* (1936) deals explicitly with the problems arising from gender role reversal in the middle-class home: its protagonist, Claudia, is the family breadwinner, her unemployed husband demoralised. However, the novel is also interested in the contrast between interwar and Edwardian motherhood, and the difficulties of combining maternal and professional roles, as I discuss in Chapter 4. This combination of themes from across the spectrum of contemporary feminist debate is repeated in other novels, and indicates Delafield's ability to represent the ambiguities of feminist debate and of women's lives in the interwar period.

In 1928 Ray Strachey wrote that "[t]he main fight is over, and the main victory is won. With education, enfranchisement, and legal equality all conceded, the future of women lies in their

⁶⁸ E.M. Delafield, 'I am So Often Annoyed by Women', *Daily Mail*, 7 July 1931, p10. Daily Mail Historical Archive accessed 25 August 2014

⁶⁹ E.M. Delafield, 'Any Husband is Better than None', *Daily Mail*, 9 July 1932, p8. Daily Mail Historical Archive accessed 7 September 2014

⁷⁰ E.M. Delafield, 'Beverley Nichols according to E.M. Delafield', *Time and Tide*, Vol XII No 15, p438, 11 April 1931

⁷¹ E.M. Delafield, 'To Administer Justice' in E.M. Delafield fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, University of British Columbia Library (folder 3.4)

own hands.”⁷² Interwar feminism became a polite but sometimes invisible lobbying and campaigning process, working within the political machinery now open to women.⁷³ It was also operating in a social and political context marked by a strongly conservative attitude to gender roles and a reinvigorated anti-feminism. This anti-feminism arose in part directly from the experience of the First World War: some commentators identified women as in some way responsible for the horrors of war, since they had encouraged men to enlist, worked to support the war effort, and benefited from a perceived new freedom and greater opportunities.⁷⁴ Political, economic and social upheaval following the war was both represented and contained through notions of sex antagonism; this inhibited feminist challenge of defined gender roles, and indeed the need to create peace and order meant that conservative notions of masculinity and femininity were as attractive to feminists as they were to general society.⁷⁵ Feminists were, however, optimistic about the opportunities that the changes wrought by war would provide, an optimism exemplified by the title of Mary Austin’s 1918 article, ‘Sex Emancipation Through War’. This optimism provoked an anti-feminist backlash: as Pugh argues, “many men and some prominent anti-feminist women, reacting sharply against the entire wartime experience, simply wanted everything put back in its proper place”, with a particular focus upon the perceived proper place of women.⁷⁶ Arabella Kenealy, in her 1920 work *Feminism and Sex-Extinction*, posits sexual difference and therefore different gender roles as natural and desirable:

Mannish women and womanish men are alike incapable for experiencing and inspiring the love-passion which charms and transfigures life for true man and true woman. These unfortunate, imperfect neuter-persons, because of the deficiencies in them of normal sex attributes and impulse, are shut out from the richest and sweetest, most sacred emotions of Humanity – precisely as persons of defective brain are debarred from the richer and fuller appreciations and joys of consciousness.⁷⁷

Kenealy considers that the subjection of women has been spiritually beneficial to the human race,⁷⁸ and invokes the arguments of eugenics when she suggests that emancipated women “lapse to the biological grade, not of cultured, but of rough working men”,⁷⁹ and that “virile” mothers give birth to effeminate sons.⁸⁰ Kenealy’s assertions about gender roles were echoed by the *Daily Mail*, and probably read more widely there. Girls were criticised for bringing their relationships with men “down to the safe and commonplace level of equal-comradeship” and consequently losing “the elusive spirit of romance”;⁸¹ an article by ‘A Man from the War’ entitled ‘My Ideal Wife’ listed all

⁷² Strachey, p385

⁷³ Caine, *English Feminism*, p174

⁷⁴ Caine, *English Feminism*, p180-181; Kent, ‘Gender Reconstruction after the First World War’, p69

⁷⁵ Kent, ‘Gender Reconstruction after the First World War’, p70-71

⁷⁶ Pugh, p72

⁷⁷ Arabella Kenealy, *Feminism and Sex-Extinction* (London: T Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1920), pp26-27

⁷⁸ Kenealy, p4

⁷⁹ Kenealy, p28

⁸⁰ Kenealy, p32

⁸¹ ‘Girls and Cheap Cynicism’, *Daily Mail*, 1 March 1921, p11. Daily Mail Historical Archive accessed 7 September 2014

the attributes the writer found unacceptable in his ideal wife, including being “superbly self-sufficient” or a “cropped good sport”, having a “lengthy stride”, and having the temerity to “bluntly demand that new hat, disdaining to make love to me adorably for it”.⁸²

Medical and sexological discourse promoted harmonious marriage with defined gender roles as a ‘cure’ for the sexual disorder of war.⁸³ The popularisation of Freudian psychology in 1920s Britain, and the work of sexologists led to an understanding of “sexuality and war [... as] inextricably intertwined”, in a context which now defined sexual and gender difference in terms of martial antagonism; these conflicts could, sexological theories suggested, be resolved by “mutual, pleasurable sexual experiences within marriage”.⁸⁴ Such ideas stimulated an anti-feminist reaction which valorised motherhood, reasserted and sometimes exacerbated marriage bars in key professions, demonised single mothers and fostered antipathy to spinsters.⁸⁵ The sexologist Walter Gallichan suggested, in his 1929 work *The Poison of Prudery*, that women who rejected a traditional domestic and wifely role were “degenerate [...] a menace to civilisation. They provoke sex misunderstanding and antagonism; they wreck conjugal happiness.”⁸⁶ There was vigorous criticism of young women or ‘flappers’ for asserting greater social freedoms of dress and behaviour, and shirking their duty as potential mothers.⁸⁷ The *Daily Mail* was particularly antipathetic to the ‘flapper vote’, arguing in editorials like ‘Stop the Flapper Vote Folly’ that the “absurd project of votes for girls” was “mischievous to national interests” and an “act of national treachery”.⁸⁸ The flappers themselves were criticised for frivolity, irresponsibility and for seeking to continue to work after the end of the war.⁸⁹ Women who rejected maternity and ventured into the public sphere were pathologised as degenerate: feminists were strongly associated with theories of abnormality and degeneracy and with the ‘surplus women’ who were a visible reminder of the war, linking feminism with armed conflict and death.⁹⁰ Extremely hostile voices, such as that of Anthony M Ludovici, expressed a profound antipathy towards feminists, unmarried women, and “disillusioned married women”, who, he considered, were deeply socially disruptive:

With two million spinsters, and — if we reckon the disgruntled married women — with probably two or three million more women distributed all over England, who are prepared to malign both man and life and to cause the effect of their thwarted impulses to be felt in a thousand ways, a good deal of misery and friction must necessarily arise from modern conditions which it is extremely difficult to relieve.

⁸² A Man from the War, ‘My Ideal Wife’, *Daily Mail*, 22 March 1919, p4. Daily Mail Historical Archive accessed 7 September 2014

⁸³ Kent, ‘Gender Reconstruction after the First World War’, p71

⁸⁴ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: the Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1993), pp106-107

⁸⁵ Caine, *English Feminism*, p180-181

⁸⁶ Walter Gallichan, *The Poison of Prudery* (London: T Werner Laurie, 1929) cited in Kent, *Making Peace*, pp111-112

⁸⁷ Pugh, p78

⁸⁸ ‘Stop the Flapper Vote Folly!’, *Daily Mail*, 11 April 1927, p10. Daily Mail Historical Archive accessed 21 September 2014

⁸⁹ Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty* (London: Pandora, 1989) p24

⁹⁰ Kent, ‘Gender Reconstruction after the First World War’, pp74-75

But the most serious aspect of the spinster and embittered wife question, from the standpoint of the nation's life, is the compensation which, consciously or unconsciously, these unmated women and revolted wives, particularly the wealthy and leisured ones, seek for their thwarted instincts. The mother's fostering care never having been experienced, its joys and thrills are sought along other channels. The lust of exercising power becomes a consuming passion, and its owner is usually quite indifferent as to the means she uses to express it. Any movement, any policy, any kind of interference may supply the opportunity, and the merits of the case will always be subordinate to the urgent need of alleviating the hunger for compensatory power.⁹¹

Ludovici's extremist, proto-fascist position was unusual, but his fundamental assumption that marriage and motherhood were the proper and natural roles of women was not unusual. In the later 1920s and 1930s, women's magazines promoted a professionalised domesticity and the primacy of the married state, deterring women from divorce and promoting pre-marital employment choices that would either train women for homemaking, or enable them to meet a husband.⁹² *Woman's Own* magazine, which was published from 1932, emphasised the paramount importance of marriage, stressing that married women should not "cease to be the attractive alluring girl he married. Resolve [...] never to get slack about your appearance";⁹³ the magazine's readers were reminded that husbands "should be encouraged to feel like bachelors: 'when you come to think about it the average man gets a fairly raw deal out of marriage in comparison to what he puts into it'".⁹⁴ This discourse of domesticated feminine submissiveness countered feminist efforts to promote women's education and the development of personal and financial independence. Feminist campaigners themselves were aware that feminism needed to address the needs of *all* women, leading to a greater engagement with issues relating to motherhood, family life and welfare.⁹⁵ This engagement led campaigners to swim with the political and social tide: campaigns revived notions of motherhood and homemaking as women's civic as well as personal duty.⁹⁶

Delafield's thematic focus on these issues indicates her connections with feminist thinking at that time; however, she also makes use of anti-feminist argument, sometimes to effect satirical meaning, sometimes as part of a middlebrow commitment to realism that requires a voice or action to counter the aspirations of her heroines, and sometimes apparently to sustain a reassuring conservative voice within her texts for her middlebrow audience. In *Faster! Faster!* Claudia's mother Mrs Peel is a constant negative presence, criticising Claudia for working and for her style of parenting; Mrs Kendall in *Mrs Harter* (1924), and Lady Boxe in the Provincial Lady novels are outspoken anti-feminists. Negative images of women also appear: the post-flapper Bébé in *The Way Things Are* (1927) is a satirical stereotype of the sexually liberal young woman, while a number

⁹¹ Anthony M Ludovici, *Lysistrata: Or Woman's Future and Future Woman* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927 (2nd impression)), p46

⁹² Pugh, p210-214

⁹³ *Woman's Own*, 15 October 1932, p10, cited in Pugh, p213

⁹⁴ *Woman's Own*, 13 April 1935, p10, cited in Pugh, p213

⁹⁵ Caine, *English Feminism*, p175

⁹⁶ Pugh, pp88-89

of comic or bitter portrayals of spinsters appear: Miss Fish in *Challenge to Clarissa* (1931) exemplifies the former, while Blanche Christmas, who torments her meek but adulterous sister-in-law in the short story 'We Meant to be Happy (1937)' (from *Three Marriages*, 1939) is a character so negative as to be misogynous.

Recent commentators on interwar feminism consider many of the achievements it celebrated to be compromised. Substantial legislative change was enacted during the 1920s, as party political interest in the woman voter and women's issues grew, but was carefully regulated to ensure attention paid to women's interests was not disruptive: for example, no party would endorse a campaign for better information on contraception.⁹⁷ Not all legislation benefitted women's interests in the way they had hoped and some of it impeded real change, such as those bills designed to enhance the status of mothers, which refocused attention on motherhood as women's primary role.⁹⁸ Resistance and obfuscation arose when campaigners sought greater equality in employment; legislation was ineffective when tested and women in senior positions were usually tokens.⁹⁹ Feminist historians have criticised new feminism's belief in the fundamentally different needs and priorities of women, considering that this belief diminished radicalism and evaded the issues of gender roles and gender parity.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, equality feminism has been criticised for adopting masculine values relating to work and economic status, for focusing primarily on the needs of middle-class women and for failing to recognise domestic work's status and importance.¹⁰¹ Delafield's foregrounding of the domestic and of maternity in a thematic context engaged with notions of gender equality can be situated in this debate. Feminists in the interwar period negotiated a complex path through prevailing social trends and political opportunism; an overly pragmatic approach, pursuing achievable change, might lead to ineffective legislation, while an idealistic approach could be overly challenging to reasserted notions of gender and alienate women from feminist causes. It is in this context that the covert and overt feminism of Delafield's work must be considered, and I will articulate how she engages with the political and social context of interwar feminism, and the feminist readings that emerge through consideration of her textual practice.

Delafield: a feminist middlebrow writer?

Delafield is now commonly represented as a feminist writer, both by critics engaging directly with her work and by historians of the interwar period. This reading is supported by the biographical details of Delafield's life, in particular her close association with the magazine *Time and Tide* which was at the forefront of feminist campaigning during the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰² Her work for the

⁹⁷ Caine, *English Feminism*, p206-208

⁹⁸ Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', p52

⁹⁹ Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', p53

¹⁰⁰ Caine, *English Feminism*, p190

¹⁰¹ Pugh, p238

¹⁰² McCullen, p10

magazine brought her into contact with a wide circle of feminist writers and campaigners, who both supported her professional ambitions and offered a critique of her own feminist position.¹⁰³ Her own writings about her work indicate that she was interested in representing and exposing the position of women in contemporary society, through the use of her own observations within an aesthetic of realism that allowed her to “observe faithfully, and record accurately” the lives of women as she had encountered them.¹⁰⁴ Although, in comparison with some of her literary peers, her writing avoids an overt and didactic approach to feminist meaning, recent criticism of her work has established her as a feminist writer.¹⁰⁵ This reading of her work as feminist has been generally based on *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) and its sequels, which have received the most critical attention. Feminist meaning is relatively explicit in these works, which allow Delafield to represent the constraints and opportunities of life as a middle-class wife and mother, although the humorous effect of the diaries avoids any inclination towards polemic. The majority of the *Provincial Lady* novels were first published in serial form in *Time and Tide*; publication within a feminist magazine guaranteed a sympathetic audience for the *Provincial Lady*, who avows her own feminism and exposes the effects of her political views on a traditional rural society. Some attention has also been given to the feminist meanings articulated by *The Way Things Are* (1927), which is similar in theme to the *Provincial Lady* novels and deals with a more dramatic crisis in a middle-class marriage.¹⁰⁶ Other critics have identified feminist meaning in *Consequences* (1919) and *Thank Heaven Fasting* (1932), two of a number of Delafield’s works that offer critique of late Victorian and Edwardian approaches to the education of girls, and of the upper-class marriage market.¹⁰⁷ While I agree that these works articulate feminist argument, I also suggest that feminist meaning in her fiction is often effaced and ambiguous because her novels continued to attempt to speak to a conservative, mainstream middlebrow audience as well as a feminist one. A full appreciation of the feminist content of her works requires the reader to look behind some of the middlebrow conventions that feature in her novels, and to bring a critical insight and contextual knowledge to the text that will allow covert feminist meaning to emerge. However, I do not suggest that Delafield is necessarily expressing a muted middlebrow feminism. In her work on Elizabeth von Arnim, Jennifer Shepherd argues that her comic novels “peddle a conservative cultural feminism to a group of readers alienated from radical feminist politics”;¹⁰⁸ von Arnim, she argues, expresses a “diluted form

¹⁰³ Rachel R. Mather, *The Heirs of Jane Austen: twentieth-century writers of the comedy of manners* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p41. Mather notes that Vera Brittain was disappointed by Delafield’s “submissive” nature.

¹⁰⁴ E.M. Delafield, ‘E.M. Delafield’ in *Beginnings* ed. by L.A.G. Strong (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1935), pp62-78 (p78)

¹⁰⁵ For example, Mather, *The Heirs of Jane Austen*; Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007)

¹⁰⁶ Hilary Hinds, ‘Ordinary Disappointments: Femininity, Domesticity, and Nation in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1920–1944’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 55 (2009) 293-320 (pp313-314)

¹⁰⁷ Nicola Beauman, ‘Preface’ in E.M. Delafield, *Consequences* (London: Persephone, 2000), ppvii-xvii (pxi-xii); Light, *Forever England* p122

¹⁰⁸ Jennifer Shepherd, ‘Marketing Middlebrow Feminism: Elizabeth von Arnim, the New Woman and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Book Market’, *Philological Quarterly*, 84.1 (2005) 105-132 (p107)

of feminism” that was “marketable” to a mainstream readership.¹⁰⁹ This is not Delafield’s approach. Rather, she articulates feminist opinions which accord with, and sometimes go beyond, mainstream feminist thinking during a period when a profound anti-feminism was also being expressed in fiction and the media, but then partially obscures these opinions through her formal strategies.

Perhaps the best example of this is the novel *Thank Heaven Fasting*, in which Monica, an upper-class young woman, is launched on the marriage market in London society, some time before the First World War. Monica is pretty and initially successful in her first season and her mother has high hopes that she will make a good marriage; however, after she allows a young man to take rather mild liberties with her, her social status founders and she remains unmarried after several London seasons. Finally, a dull but kind family friend proposes to her, and the book closes with their wedding. The subtle tone of the book, which constructs Monica as a mostly dutiful and conformist daughter, and her mother as controlling, but understandably so, allows a reading of the novel as a happy ending for Monica: she has achieved her purpose in life. For the attentive reader, however, a satirical reading is also possible, indicated at the outset by the book’s title. The reference is to *As You Like It*, in which Rosalind advises Phebe not to reject Silvius:

But, mistress, know yourself: down on your knees,
And thank heaven, fasting, for a good man’s love:
For I must tell you friendly in your ear,
Sell when you can: you are not for all markets.¹¹⁰

For the reader who can recognise this quotation and follow its indication, and who looks beneath the mild wit of Delafield’s tone in this novel, a feminist critique of courtship becomes accessible in which mothers offer their daughters as commodities in exchange for improved social status or financial gain. To extract feminist critique of the circumstances of Monica’s life, the reader must pay critical attention to the straightforward realism that Delafield deploys in the text. Because Monica internalises her mother’s values so completely, rejection of them cannot come from within the events of the narrative; instead, the novel nudges the reader gently towards a consideration of the realities of Monica’s life, and to the perception of a more radical political meaning than the face value of the narrative allows. Humble has identified the ways in which middlebrow writers develop a particular and close connection with their readers through such intertextual references as the title of *Thank Heaven Fasting*, and Delafield’s approach appeals directly to the engaged and attentive middlebrow reader (14). Similarly, the ability of middlebrow fiction, through veiled allusion, hints and evasions, to allow the reader to “simultaneously know and not know what the novel is telling her”, enables and requires Delafield to make the feminist meaning of *Thank Heaven Fasting* available in a way that allows it to be both subversively understood and superficially ignored (232).

¹⁰⁹ Shepherd, pp110-111

¹¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (Act 5 Scene 3)

Delafield deploys this means of communication of criticism of women's position in many of her novels, frequently with significantly less satirical effect: *Consequences* (1919), for example, is thematically similar to *Thank Heaven Fasting* but its tone is not satirical and its feminist arguments are implicit in the tragic outcome of its heroine's life. I contend that Delafield made an active choice to write for a middlebrow audience, as is indicated by her rejection of textual innovation and her recognition of the limitations of her generic choices: reconsidering *The War-Workers* (1918) almost twenty years after its publication, Delafield identifies the ways in which the literary conventions of the time constrained her development of her text, noting that the love story included now seemed "imitative and sentimental" and concluding: "If I had known my job properly, I should have made of *The War-Workers* a series of sketches, with the slightest possible connecting thread running through them. And I should have omitted the purely conventional and quite insincere attitude that I saw fit to adopt on the subject of women's work."¹¹¹ Pursuing the development of middlebrow literary works meant that overt feminist polemic was not available to Delafield as a form of literary expression; while, at the end of her career, she could recognise the generic limitations of middlebrow writing, she did not reject them entirely. Her penultimate novel *No One Now Will Know* (1941) has much in common with *Consequences* in its depiction of a late Victorian tragedy.

Melissa Schaub argues for the existence of a middlebrow feminism in British interwar women's fiction which relies on narratives in which explicit critiques of gender norms are suppressed in favour of stories of individual women who are able to transcend their gender roles.¹¹² Some of Delafield's peers among interwar feminist writers of middlebrow fiction certainly do make use of idealised, individualised role models who transcend the limitations of their gender roles; these characters can be found throughout the fiction of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby. Delafield, however, frequently makes use of tragic heroines and anti-heroines such as Alex in *Consequences* (1919) or Lydia in *The Heel of Achilles* (1921) who, while the narratives of their lives criticise society's construction of gender roles, do not themselves transcend those roles. Where Delafield does generate feminist role models they are often comic or marginal characters who insist on their ordinariness rather than their exceptionality. Consequently, Delafield achieves an ambiguous effect: by making her feminist role models marginal, funny, or ordinary, she suggests a democratisation of individual transcendence of gender roles, making it more effective. But since transcendent feminist heroines are rare in her fiction, she also sustains the reassuring idea that only a few will escape women's traditional roles. A third reading of her fiction is also possible, in which the narrated failure of individual transcendence constitutes a critique in itself of gender roles and the structures and systems that enforce them. I argue that Delafield's fiction moves away from the

¹¹¹ E.M. Delafield, 'E.M. Delafield' in *Beginnings* ed by L. A. G. Strong (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1935), pp62-78 (p74)

¹¹² Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p19

category of middlebrow feminism as constructed by Schaub into a different category, the feminist middlebrow, since the ambiguity of her texts always allows for the marginal or subversive expression of a more critical attitude.

My argument is that, through her position within the middlebrow category, Delafield is hiding her feminism in plain view, exploiting the advantage of middlebrow's conservative reputation to articulate stealthy arguments about gender; her exploitation of ironic and unchallenging humour allows her to articulate these arguments, and her middlebrow self-positioning allows her to make them accessible to a wide audience, while her commitment to realistic literary forms ensures her work remains palatably conventional. I argue that this model of feminist expression helps define a new category, that of the *feminist* middlebrow: a group of texts concerned with the articulation and evaluation of feminist principles, and written to attract an audience sympathetic to the general aims of feminist activity. Writers whose work is likely to fall into this category include Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and Radclyffe Hall - all writers interested in the representation of the actuality of women's lives, some professed feminists, and all committed to a continuation of the project of realism that is so strongly associated with the formal aspects of the middlebrow category. These writers also foreground issues of class, gender and cultural categorisation within their works, conforming to the model of feminine middlebrow fiction established by Humble. I argue for the establishment of the category of the feminist middlebrow, and contend that Delafield contributes to its construction both through the form and content of her work, and through her self-positioning within the debated categories of feminist and middlebrow.

The feminist middlebrow forms a category within the larger grouping of feminine middlebrow writing and writers. Although many writers within this group offer, as Nicola Humble has argued, a critique of the circumstances of women's lives that is at least informed by feminist ideas, I argue that not all such texts would be included in the category of the feminist middlebrow. This small sub-category includes writers who not only offer a critique of prevailing gender roles, limited opportunities for women in terms of social and economic advancement, attitudes to sexuality and the conditions of marriage and family life, but who also indicate alternative possibilities for women within their texts, even if those possibilities are ultimately unsuccessful for the protagonists of their novels. Writers whose work falls into this category include Delafield herself, Radclyffe Hall, Elizabeth von Arnim, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and Lettice Cooper, who all produced fiction which allowed their female characters to envisage, and sometimes attain, new ways of living as a woman in the world, while sustaining a critique of patriarchal structures and constraints; the boundaries of the category might be tested by writers such as Ivy Compton-Burnett and Rosamond Lehmann, whose novels can be read as highly critical of the limited circumstances of women's lives, but do not consider or suggest other options for women. Writers who do not engage with the consequences of patriarchal control in their fiction, or who seek to reinforce it, are placed outside of this category but remain within the category of the feminine middlebrow.

Novelists such as Angela Thirkell or Vita Sackville-West, who engage very little with critique of patriarchal structures, would fall into this group, as would Stella Gibbons, who achieves highly conservative and sometimes explicitly anti-feminist effects in her work; the short story ‘Cake’ (1940), in which a former militant suffragette’s regret at not having a child causes her to persuade a young woman to submit to the husband who slaps her face, and have his baby, is a powerful example of these effects. Some writers are likely to straddle the sub-category, with some works defined as within the feminist middlebrow, and others as outside it: Dorothy Whipple’s *The Priory* (1939) is a family saga which does not critique prevailing gender roles or structures, while her novel *High Wages* (1932) takes a very different and more feminist perspective on the world of women’s work and entrepreneurship.

Both Delafield’s work, and the writing of her feminist middlebrow peers, constitutes an act of feminist significance: it is the work of women, writing both about and for women. The democratic and accessible middlebrow category allows the political meaning of this fiction to reach a wider audience. However, I also contend that a commitment to the middlebrow category brings with it a necessary compromise in explicitness of content as much as in radicalism of form. The feminist meanings emerging from Delafield’s texts are not, however, necessarily compromised: some feminist readings such as her representations of lesbian relationships as positive in *Challenge to Clarissa*, or her arguments in favour of working mothers in *Faster! Faster!*, are distinctly radical in the interwar context. Nevertheless, as Humble suggests in respect of class, Delafield’s feminist meaning often extends only a “temporary palliation” of women’s real lives in a constrained and anti-feminist society; by articulating a middlebrow feminism to her readers, she enables them to participate briefly in feminist discourse without the risk of any actual radical change in their own lives. The palliative and pleasurable qualities of middlebrow fiction keep the subversion of Delafield’s work contained. This thesis, through an evaluation of the interrelationship and interaction of Delafield’s middlebrow and feminist characteristics, will build on the existing body of critical work discussed below.

Critical work on E.M. Delafield

The single full-length work on Delafield by Maurice McCullen concentrates on biographical criticism of her work; as Faye Hammill points out, his alignment of her best work and her life experience is reductive,¹¹³ although he does consider Delafield’s formal development as a writer, discussing the development of narrative technique in her later works.¹¹⁴ He sets out to retrieve Delafield from obscurity, placing her in a tradition descending from Jane Austen and suggesting that her “fragmented world reflects the chaos of the twentieth century”.¹¹⁵ McCullen’s relation of Delafield to Austen is explored in more depth by Rachel R. Mather. Mather relates the *Diary of a*

¹¹³ Hammill, p181

¹¹⁴ McCullen, p71

¹¹⁵ McCullen, p128

Provincial Lady to other fictional and real journals that form part of a comedy of manners tradition, and also to the serial novels of the nineteenth century such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, and to the epistolary novels that informed Austen's work.¹¹⁶ Mather identifies Delafield's writing as feminist because her protagonist defines herself on her own terms and records her experiences;¹¹⁷ this allowed her to attempt to "break the stereotypical pattern of women's lives".¹¹⁸ Mather notes that critical attention at the time of publication recognised the self-assertion implicit in the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* and the inherent radicalism of a woman setting down the trivial details of daily life, attaching philosophical meanings to them and making them the subject of satirical humour;¹¹⁹ her contemporaries valorised her delicacy and ironic approach over more direct appeals in fiction for social change.¹²⁰ Both McCullen and Mather emphasise Delafield's use of irony; I argue that irony is only one of the means by which she conveys feminist meaning in a middlebrow literary context, and demonstrate that her feminist arguments go beyond a delicately ironic approach to the critique of gender norms. Delafield represents women as writers frequently throughout her fiction and, echoing Mather's assessment of the *Provincial Lady* novels as feminist because their protagonist achieves self-definition and self-assertion, I argue that these representations constitute the expression of feminist meaning. However, I also suggest that Delafield brings an ambiguity to such assertiveness and the construction of selfhood in her fiction, because of her commitment to realism and to providing readerly pleasure for her middlebrow audience; this issue is discussed in more depth in Chapters 1 and 4.

Alison Light also considers the feminist effects of Delafield's work, again principally focusing on the *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, and notes that "while nothing in Delafield's writing actually challenges the status quo, the satire suggests some distance from its conventions, and provides some food for thought for those who wish to go further and complain outright".¹²¹ Comparing the *Provincial Lady* with Jan Struther's almost unfailingly optimistic character, Mrs Miniver, who also first appeared in print in serial form in *The Times* during the late 1930s, Light suggests that the *Provincial Lady* is intended to raise protest in the reader at her lot and the limitations of her life; she is "both an embodiment of and a rebellion against pre-war expectations for women of her class".¹²² Light identifies the paradox at the heart of Delafield's fiction, which can both attack and reinforce the norms and constraints that affect her protagonists. I build on Light's articulation of this paradox by exploring the ambiguities that establish and sustain it within Delafield's writing.

¹¹⁶ Mather, p33

¹¹⁷ Mather, p34

¹¹⁸ Mather, p35

¹¹⁹ Mather, p35

¹²⁰ Mather, p44

¹²¹ Light, p117

¹²² Light, p116-117

Hammill, in her chapter on the Provincial Lady novels, identifies and interrogates their ambiguities regarding gender roles and cultural positioning. She identifies Delafield as feminist from her articulated self-assertion and self-production as a writer, but notes that her literary work, rather than providing an escape from traditional domestic roles, becomes in fact part of her domestic duties, since her financial success allows her to provide for her family: “The work of writing becomes an addition to her existing burden of caring for her family.”¹²³ Additionally, The *Diary* does not simply oppose domesticity and literary work: “domesticity is also presented as something that can nourish creativity” and the material and form of much of the diary is constructed from domestic events.¹²⁴ For Hammill, Delafield’s texts “both exemplify and examine the middlebrow perspective”.¹²⁵ The Provincial Lady defines herself as middlebrow through her own reading taste, which engages with the highbrow but shows a preference for realism and celebrates the work of a wide range of middlebrow writing.¹²⁶ This reinforces the status of the text as middlebrow, but also challenges hierarchy, since Delafield “refuses to privilege modernist writing above domestic realist fiction”.¹²⁷ Hammill also identifies the Provincial Lady’s concern with her appearance and conventional style of dress as “part of [her] assumption of middlebrow identity, in contrast to the deliberate eccentricity of highbrows”¹²⁸ and as part of a view of writing as a profession that any woman could take up, which “permits a conception of the author as everywoman”.¹²⁹ Hammill’s reading of the Provincial Lady novels establishes a plainly feminist Delafield whose middlebrow self-positioning constitutes an act of radicalism that develops cultural democracy as well as greater possibilities for the revision of gender roles. I make use of this construction of Delafield as a feminist writer while examining the effect upon the emergent radicalism in her writing of its position within the middlebrow category.

Hilary Hinds, considering the construction and representation of disappointment in feminine middlebrow fiction, makes use of *The Way Things Are* to argue that this text, with others, articulates the personal, social and psychic underpinnings of disappointment, and locates feminine disappointment as an important function in the construction of interwar English identities that are predicated on a domesticated masculinity sited within a middle-class context.¹³⁰ Hinds does not articulate the notion that Delafield’s representation of disappointment constitutes a feminist critique of the circumstances which require feminine disappointment to shore up middle-class domesticity; as she notes, the novels she reviews may show the appeal of domesticity, although they

¹²³ Hammill, p188

¹²⁴ Hammill, p188

¹²⁵ Hammill, p194

¹²⁶ Hammill, pp194-195

¹²⁷ Hammill, p195

¹²⁸ Hammill, p191

¹²⁹ Hammill, p193

¹³⁰ Hilary Hinds, ‘Ordinary Disappointments: Femininity, Domesticity, and Nation in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1920–1944’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 55 (2009), 293-320 (p314)

do “insist on the subjective cost” of that appeal.¹³¹ Her paper indicates how *The Way Things Are* locates Laura’s beliefs and desires in her cultural moment, linking them to current trends and ideas, and through this maps the way in which feminine disappointment is socially constituted;¹³² the novel’s frequent references to the popularised elements of Freudian theory also confirms the substantive nature of feminine disappointment by identifying its psychic and unconscious foundation.¹³³ In the context of a paper which notes that middlebrow fiction was a genre in which women could speak to other women,¹³⁴ and that disappointment has been an important theme in feminist discourse in more recent years,¹³⁵ Hinds’ conclusions may help to identify *The Way Things Are* as a feminist text, countering other cultural products which often invoke marriage and motherhood as “as sites and symbols of optimism and expectation”.¹³⁶

Working with the recent criticism of Delafield’s work, this thesis will extend the scope of consideration to include a wider range of Delafield’s published fiction, looking beyond her best-known novels to analyse the effects of the middlebrow literary category on her feminist expression, and vice versa. I will also work to site Delafield in her historical and cultural context, particularly that of the development and construction of middlebrow culture and of interwar feminist politics and ideology.

Methodological approach and chapter outlines

My methodological approach in this thesis is to consider Delafield’s fictions as products of a particular historically situated ideology, and to read them in the context of their location in terms of class, politics and gender. Through a close reading of the selected texts I identify literary characteristics which locate these novels within the category of the feminist middlebrow and demonstrate Delafield’s approach to the expression of feminist meaning through ambiguity in the middlebrow context. This meaning may be explicit and read as intentional, but it may also be emergent meaning that is legible only to the sympathetic reader or indeed to the reader of the twenty-first century.

Having read the full range of Delafield’s novels and collected short stories, I identified a number of dominant and recurring themes for critical consideration. These themes occur across the range of her fiction in terms of chronology and formal approach, and those which I have selected all relate to the feminist issue of how women’s subjectivity is constrained and effaced, and the intrinsic and extrinsic elements that hinder the achievement of female subjectivity. I have selected novels from throughout Delafield’s career to demonstrate the importance of these themes to her writing, and also in order to build on the critical material available on the full range of her

¹³¹ Hinds, p314

¹³² Hinds, p307

¹³³ Hinds, p309

¹³⁴ Hinds, p294

¹³⁵ Hinds, p300

¹³⁶ Hinds, p300

work. I also consider archival material in relation to these themes and to ensure that all of Delafield's writing about her own writing is interrogated in order to understand her formal approach. I have made use of appropriate theoretical constructs and positions where relevant to the theme of the chapter. For each thematic area, I have also identified comparator texts from within the category of the middlebrow and beyond it, in order to situate Delafield's writings in her literary context and to explore more fully the aesthetic choices she made in constructing feminist narratives for a middlebrow audience. The chapters and themes are as follows.

Chapter 1 “Sit upon window-seat and think about Myself”: autobiography, subjectivity and the middlebrow in *Diary of a Provincial Lady*. This chapter provides a short biographical summary and investigates how Delafield made literary use of autobiographical material, evaluating the position of the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* and its sequels as ambiguously autobiographical *and* fictive texts in the context both of feminist and post-structuralist criticism of the autobiographical form, paying particular attention to the concept of autobiography as a paradox that seeks to establish an authentic and durable subjectivity but which requires, in its production, a division of the self. I also consider the *Diary* in terms of a continuum of exteriority and interiority in autobiographical writing and evaluate how Delafield's text both reveals and conceals feminist articulations of self.

Chapter 2 “Discussion closes with ribald reference to *Well of Loneliness*”: lesbian representations. I review representations of lesbian characters, both overt and implicit, in Delafield's writing and consider the effects of these representations on the feminist tone of her work. Delafield's novels feature lesbian characters in major and minor roles. Sometimes these characters are exemplary or heroic, allowing them to be read as a subversion of heteronormativity; in other cases they are used for the purposes of humour and satire and can be seen as conservative in their effect. I analyse in particular Delafield's allusive representations of the lesbian as tragic heroine in her 1919 novel *Consequences*, and her use of minor and comic lesbian characters as a distraction from the lesbian potential of central characters in *Challenge to Clarissa* and *The Provincial Lady in War-Time*, a device I term the ‘lesbian sideshow’. I also evaluate the position and function of lesbian characters within middlebrow fiction, which may be as mildly shocking or challenging material, as representation of an other against which middlebrow culture can define itself, and as an opportunity to challenge middlebrow culture from within.

Chapter 3 “Darling, who knows best – you or mother?”: mothers and daughters. Delafield makes frequent use of mothers as anti-feminist, conservative forces. The patriarchal father barely exists in Delafield; the mother takes on the role of oppressor and controller of daughters. I evaluate the feminist effect of narratives of oppressive motherhood in the context of the tensions between subversion and traditionalism throughout Delafield's work, and consider the position of

such controlling mothers within interwar fiction identified as middlebrow or highbrow. Through a consideration of *The Heel of Achilles* (1921) and *Thank Heaven Fasting* (1932) I discuss how Delafield's representation of the controlling mother contributes to the construction of notions of selfhood and of feminism and anti-feminism within the context of middlebrow cultural fiction, demonstrating how Delafield's narratives of mother-daughter conflict allow her to simultaneously express and efface feminist meaning through their formal approach, maintaining palatability for the middlebrow reader.

Chapter 4 “She was fundamentally happier, and enjoying a greater freedom, than ever in her life before”: women's work and women's writing. In this chapter, I consider the representation of women's work in *Faster! Faster!* (1936), and the representations of woman writers in *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (1930) and *The Way Things Are* (1927). I argue that, in common with Delafield's other works, these narratives maintain the possibility of dual political readings, created in part through marginal or subversive engagements with feminist politics, and dependent on the position and engagement of the reader. These possible readings sustain an argument in favour of women's work attractive to radical readers, but also maintain palatability for the conservative reader concerned by the withdrawal of women from the domestic sphere. Through a consideration of the textual ambiguity of her novels, I explore the ways in which Delafield's representations of women's work function as analogies for the concept of the middlebrow, giving a space to interrogate and construct notions of middlebrow authenticity and value, and I demonstrate how Delafield's narratives of ambiguity contribute to the construction of the concept of the middlebrow text.

Chapter 1 “Sit upon window-seat and think about Myself”: autobiography, subjectivity and the middlebrow in *Diary of a Provincial Lady*

I begin this chapter with a short biographical summary, considering in particular the varied roles held by Delafield during her life and the boundaries she established between them. Following the biographical summary, I undertake an empirical investigation into the relationship between fiction and autobiography in the four books based on the Provincial Lady's diaries, acknowledging Delafield's own assertion of the work's fictive status and her use of recognisable events and personalities from her own life within the text. I then interrogate the way in which Delafield makes strategic and political use of an autobiographical form in a fictional context in order to explore feminist questions, and also the ways in which the form, and particularly Delafield's use of comedy, affects the feminist impact of her writing even while maintaining an acceptable political and formal position for a broad middlebrow readership. I also evaluate the relationship of Delafield's readership to the *Diary* and its reception both as an autobiography of an increasingly well-known person and as fiction in its context as a middlebrow text articulating feminist viewpoints. I argue that Delafield's use of intersubjectivity – a strong and intimate connection between the autobiographer and the reader – helps establish and make legible dual readings of her texts dependent on the political position of the individual reader.

I go on to evaluate the construction of subjectivity through the Provincial Lady novels, beginning with a theoretical consideration of the construction and representation of subjectivity, interiority and exteriority through autobiographical/diary writing drawing on feminist and poststructuralist critique of autobiography. I then consider the *Diary* in relation to this critique, arguing that the protagonist develops over the series of novels from generic cipher to a clearly defined individual, taking into account Delafield's use of the diary novel form to reveal and/or conceal subjectivity and to construct or dismantle a feminine identity through the model of the Provincial Lady. I argue that it is possible to read in the diaries two types of feminist articulation of self: the creation of a generic and relational identity which supports identification and consciousness-raising in the reader; and the subsequent development of individual subjectivity which is defined as separate from others and may be viewed as exemplary. I conclude that Delafield's creation of these two feminist 'selves' typifies her use of ambiguity to express feminist meaning in a middlebrow cultural context. Throughout this chapter I argue that Delafield sustains across the Provincial Lady novels an ambiguity between the fictive and autobiographical qualities of her text; this ambiguity allows her to express feminist meaning while maintaining a generally conservative reading palatable to a middlebrow audience.

Delafield's life and works: a summary

There is one full-length biography of E.M. Delafield, Violet Powell's *The Life of a Provincial Lady* (1988), authorised by Delafield's daughter Rosamund Dashwood and drawing extensively on her recollections of her mother, as well as those friends still living at the time of its writing. Maurice McCullen's 1985 study of Delafield contains significant biographical information and also benefited from Rosamund Dashwood's input.¹³⁷ Both works rely considerably on Delafield's fiction as a source of biographical information. Delafield herself published three autobiographical essays in the collections *Beginnings* (1935), *Ten Contemporaries* (1937) and *Titles to Fame* (1937); her memoir of her time as a postulant nun, unpublished in her lifetime, is included as a chapter in the Powell biography. This summary draws on all these sources as well as archive material and UK government records.

E.M. Delafield was born in Hove on 9 June 1890 and given the baptismal name of Edmée Elizabeth Monica de la Pasture.¹³⁸ Her father, Count Henry du Carel de la Pasture, was descended from an aristocratic French family; he was 40 at the time of her birth.¹³⁹ His wife, Elizabeth Bonham, was 16 years his junior and the daughter of a member of the British Consular Service.¹⁴⁰ A second daughter, Bettine Marie Yolande (always known as Yoé) was born in 1892.¹⁴¹ The de la Pastures were a Catholic family and their two daughters were brought up in that faith.¹⁴² The family was "rather nomadic"¹⁴³ during Delafield's early childhood, but by 1901 was established at The Priory, Llandogo, Monmouthshire, a household including a French teacher, a governess and four domestic servants; in the 1901 census Count Henry is described as "living on his own means".¹⁴⁴ Those means also extended to a London house, 62 Chester Square;¹⁴⁵ the family's income was supplemented by Mrs Henry de la Pasture's successful literary career. From the mid-1890s until the First World War she published a number of novels, including the children's book for which she is best known, *The Unlucky Family*.¹⁴⁶

Edmée and Yoé were educated at school as well as at home; Delafield attended convent schools in England and Belgium from the age of 10 to 17.¹⁴⁷ The two sisters were extremely close and dependent on each other; both their family home and their schools constrained their freedom, and their mutual dependence was fostered by their mother's publicly expressed disappointment that she had produced "shy, gawky" daughters rather than sons.¹⁴⁸ Delafield wrote that her mother was

¹³⁷ Maurice L McCullen, *E. M. Delafield* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), piii

¹³⁸ McCullen, pv

¹³⁹ Violet Powell, *The Life of a Provincial Lady* (London: Heinemann, 1988) p2

¹⁴⁰ Powell, p3

¹⁴¹ Powell p3; 1901 United Kingdom Census

¹⁴² Powell, p3

¹⁴³ Powell, p4

¹⁴⁴ 1901 United Kingdom Census

¹⁴⁵ Powell, p7

¹⁴⁶ Powell, pp3-4

¹⁴⁷ McCullen, p2

¹⁴⁸ McCullen, pp2-3

“emotionally loving, terribly possessive” and unconsciously determined to ensure “that I should grow up to be nothing but an extension of her own personality”; the family considered it a failure of loyalty, an important quality among the de la Pastures, to “admit that one was not happy at home.”¹⁴⁹ McCullen asserts that Delafield’s “unhappy childhood became common knowledge”.¹⁵⁰

The sisters’ interdependence and unhappiness were intensified still further by their father’s death in 1908; Delafield had made her social debut in London a year earlier.¹⁵¹ McCullen, drawing on Delafield’s novels that deal with this topic and on conversations with her adult daughter, suggests that after her father’s death “Edmée drifted into a sort of social limbo, making the social round as an awkward appendage of her widowed mother. She had no sense of self, no purpose in life, and nothing to look forward to.”¹⁵² It is certainly true that Delafield was unsuccessful in the Edwardian marriage market; Delafield herself records that “I had, in common with the great majority of my contemporaries, been brought up to believe that it was something between a minor tragedy and a major disgrace, for a girl to remain unsought in marriage after her twentieth birthday [...] I was acutely conscious of being a failure.”¹⁵³ Mrs Henry de la Pasture married her second husband, Sir Hugh Clifford, a colonial administrator, in September 1910. Her daughters were told of her marriage only after the wedding, which took place while they were staying with their aunt.¹⁵⁴ In January 1911 Sir Hugh and Lady Clifford departed for Ceylon, and when Edmée came of age six months later, she escaped her family and her sense of failure by entering a French religious community as a postulant nun.¹⁵⁵

Delafield’s account of her time at the convent records the details of her experience living under conventual rule, including the discomforts of poor food, lack of vigorous exercise, limited personal hygiene and the physical mortification required of nuns at that time;¹⁵⁶ she also explains how the religious life requires “the absolute destruction of the ‘self’” through a regime that ensured that “personalities in conversation were not only forbidden, but made impossible”.¹⁵⁷ Part of Delafield’s rationale for entering the convent was to find some useful occupation,¹⁵⁸ and in this respect her decision was a successful one: undertaking such tasks as domestic work and teaching brought about a “change from discontented inactivity to ordered occupation, [...] an absolute revelation of unsuspected enjoyment.”¹⁵⁹ After eight months as a postulant, when her superiors were beginning to consider that she could make her first vows and become a novice, Delafield learned that Yoé was also considering the religious life. Already doubting her own vocation, and

¹⁴⁹ E.M. Delafield, ‘Brides of Heaven’ in Powell, pp14-29 (p14)

¹⁵⁰ McCullen, p2

¹⁵¹ Powell, p7

¹⁵² McCullen, p2

¹⁵³ ‘Brides of Heaven’, p14

¹⁵⁴ Powell, pp9-10

¹⁵⁵ Powell, p12

¹⁵⁶ ‘Brides of Heaven’, pp19-23

¹⁵⁷ ‘Brides of Heaven’, pp20-21

¹⁵⁸ ‘Brides of Heaven’, p14

¹⁵⁹ ‘Brides of Heaven’, p21

feeling herself unfitted to meet the exacting requirements of the order, Delafield became convinced that she must leave the convent, and prevent Yoé from making a similar mistake; she confessed her wish to leave to the Novice-Mistress.¹⁶⁰ There followed some weeks in which efforts were made to persuade her to stay; the strain caused her to lose three stones in weight, but eventually she was able to leave the convent.¹⁶¹

It is unclear how Delafield spent the period between her return from the convent and the outbreak of World War I, but from 1914 to 1917 she worked for the Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) at the Exeter Voluntary Aid Hospital, undertaking clerical and ancillary duties.¹⁶² Delafield was paid a pound a week and lodged in an Exeter hostel. As she had found in the convent, work could be liberating: “It was independence [...] it was emancipation of the most delirious kind, it was occupation, it was self-respect – above all, it was freedom.”¹⁶³ I deal with Delafield’s representations of the liberating possibilities of paid work at more length in Chapter 4. This freedom enabled her to find her literary voice and in 1916 she began work, in her limited spare time, on her first novel, *Zella Sees Herself*.¹⁶⁴ This novel was accepted by Heinemann and published in 1917; having already adopted ‘Elizabeth’ as her chosen first name,¹⁶⁵ Delafield now took up Yoé’s suggested pseudonym, a translation of her surname and necessary to distinguish her work from “another writer’s very successful and popular plays and novels”.¹⁶⁶ Delafield’s account of her first novel in *Beginnings* does not state explicitly that the very successful and popular Mrs Henry de la Pasture is, in fact, her mother, possibly because Lady Clifford disliked being “renowned by the reading public as the mother of E.M. Delafield”.¹⁶⁷

Delafield’s literary output during her early years as a writer was considerable, with five novels published in three years. Her first earnings from *Zella Sees Herself* amounted to £54, a year’s VAD salary.¹⁶⁸ *Zella Sees Herself* and *The War-Workers* received positive reviews in *Punch* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.¹⁶⁹ In 1917 Delafield took up a post in the regional headquarters of the Ministry of National Service in Bristol but continued to write, acquiring a literary agent in A.D. Peters and eventually signing a contract with Hutchinson for the publication of her novels.¹⁷⁰

Delafield met her husband, Paul Dashwood, through her mother, who had come to know Major Dashwood on a journey from the Gold Coast back to England in April 1919.¹⁷¹ A civil engineer, Paul had previously written Delafield a letter praising her books and was keen to meet her

¹⁶⁰ ‘Brides of Heaven’, p27

¹⁶¹ ‘Brides of Heaven’, p32

¹⁶² E.M. Delafield, ‘E.M. Delafield’ in *Beginnings* ed. by L.A.G. Strong (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1935), pp62-78 (p72)

¹⁶³ ‘E.M. Delafield’, p72

¹⁶⁴ ‘E.M. Delafield’, p72

¹⁶⁵ McCullen, p5

¹⁶⁶ ‘E.M. Delafield’, p74

¹⁶⁷ Powell, p1

¹⁶⁸ ‘E.M. Delafield’, p75

¹⁶⁹ Powell, p36

¹⁷⁰ Powell, p38

¹⁷¹ Powell, p41

on his brief stay in England.¹⁷² Their courtship progressed quickly and they were married on 17 July 1919, leaving three months later for Hong Kong where Paul was to take up an appointment.¹⁷³ They lived in the Far East for two years, mainly in Singapore where their son Lionel was born in 1920.¹⁷⁴ Delafield's rate of publication slowed to one book a year in the first years of their marriage. Delafield rarely made use of the Far East setting in her fiction and wrote little about her experiences there. Powell suggests that "[a]lthough there is plenty of evidence that Elizabeth was happy with Paul in these Malayan days", the lifestyle there did not suit her.¹⁷⁵ McCullen goes further and reports that "these years were not particularly happy ones for Elizabeth. She lived in British compounds sealed off from the rich life around her. Social life centred on the Club, with its gossip, parties, occasional scandal – and once again she did not fit in."¹⁷⁶ Determined to bring up her son herself, rather than despatch him to an English boarding school at a young age, as was the norm for colonial families at that time, Delafield expressed strongly her wish to return home.¹⁷⁷ Both Powell and McCullen hint that she may have threatened to go without her husband if he did not agree.¹⁷⁸ McCullen suggests that Delafield persuaded her husband to return to England, limiting his own career opportunities and earning potential, by undertaking to support the family through her writing.¹⁷⁹ Whatever threats or promises were made, the whole family returned to England in 1922.¹⁸⁰

By 1923 they were established in the house that would be their permanent home for the rest of Delafield's life, Croyle, near Kentisbeare in Devon;¹⁸¹ at this time, Delafield was received as a member of the Anglican church.¹⁸² Paul Dashwood took a post as land agent for a nearby estate, unable to find an engineering post.¹⁸³ Despite domestic duties and local positions as a magistrate and president of the Women's Institute,¹⁸⁴ Delafield developed her literary career, beginning to write book reviews and articles for *Time and Tide*. In 1924 their daughter Rosamund was born at Croyle, and the family settled into a pattern in which nannies and governesses cared for the children and Delafield wrote whenever her family or social commitments would allow her to do so, making good use of small gaps in her busy schedule; she published at least one book, often two or three, each year until the end of her life.¹⁸⁵ McCullen reports Rosamund's recollection that her mother "not only tolerated but welcomed her children's interruptions – 'She was utterly marvellous about

¹⁷² McCullen, p6

¹⁷³ McCullen, p6

¹⁷⁴ McCullen, p7

¹⁷⁵ Powell, p44

¹⁷⁶ McCullen, p7

¹⁷⁷ McCullen, p8

¹⁷⁸ McCullen, p8; Powell, p50

¹⁷⁹ McCullen, p8

¹⁸⁰ Powell, p50

¹⁸¹ McCullen, p8

¹⁸² Powell, p53

¹⁸³ McCullen, p8

¹⁸⁴ Powell, p56

¹⁸⁵ McCullen, p8

that.’ Rosamund never recalls feeling that she should not interrupt her mother or being chided for doing so.’¹⁸⁶ Opinions vary as to Paul’s attitude to his wife’s writing; her American publisher felt he disapproved of her independent career, but Delafield’s friend Hamish Hamilton recalls Paul taking various caricatures of himself in good part, and as enthusiastic about reading Delafield’s work.¹⁸⁷

The financial security provided by the success of *Diary of a Provincial Lady* enabled Delafield to rent a London flat, 57 Doughty Street in Bloomsbury, from 1931; thereafter she spent part of each year in London until the early 1940s, both children by this time being at boarding school. McCullen characterises this as the beginning of a double life, in which literary endeavour took place in London, and family life, during the children’s school holidays, took place at Croyle, and asserts that “she fitted better in her London circle” due to her dislike of country pursuits and despite her considerable activity in the Kentisbeare community.¹⁸⁸ Her London life enabled her to develop existing friendships such as those with the psychiatrist Dr Margaret Posthuma, Cicely McCall and Lorna Lewis; Delafield came to rely greatly on Lorna Lewis who acted as an unofficial secretary to Delafield and aunt to her children, and was a regular visitor to Croyle, welcomed with more enthusiasm by Delafield than by the rest of the family.¹⁸⁹ The London flat also enabled her to develop her professional, literary life and to increase her involvement with *Time and Tide*.

Time and Tide published much of Delafield’s journalism and short fiction. Established by Margaret Rhondda in 1920 and with an all-female board of directors, *Time and Tide* intended to enable women to become “a powerful political presence” by providing them with information that would help them use their newly-acquired votes effectively.¹⁹⁰ The magazine was not aligned to any political party, but supported all women members of parliament and commented on legislation that had particular significance for women, as well as campaigning on issues related to gender equality.¹⁹¹ *Time and Tide* was strongly associated with the Six Point Group, a feminist organisation established in 1921 campaigning for legislation on six key points that would address disparities of social justice and promote gender equality.¹⁹² Delafield’s involvement with *Time and Tide* brought her into contact with a wide range of women writers and activists: Cicely Hamilton, Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Rose Macaulay, Kate O’Brien and Naomi Mitchison were all contributors to the periodical.¹⁹³ Delafield met Virginia Woolf through her work at *Time and Tide*, leading to the publication of her two works of literary criticism by the Hogarth Press;¹⁹⁴ the Woolfs visited

¹⁸⁶ McCullen, p9

¹⁸⁷ Powell, pp69-70

¹⁸⁸ McCullen, pp10-11

¹⁸⁹ Powell, p100

¹⁹⁰ Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London: Pandora Press, 1984), p6

¹⁹¹ Spender, p10

¹⁹² Spender, p175

¹⁹³ Spender, ppvii-viii

¹⁹⁴ Powell, p141

Delafield at Croyle.¹⁹⁵ In 1927 Delafield joined the board of directors of *Time and Tide*.¹⁹⁶ McCullen reports that “[those] who knew Delafield well deny the applicability of that term [feminist] to her. They point out that she was too well bred for the shrillness and acrimony associated with feminist writing.”¹⁹⁷ Delafield’s strong public association with the overtly feminist *Time and Tide* suggests that she was comfortable with feminism both as a label and as a system of beliefs, no matter how little shrill or acrimonious her writing was.

By 1929 Delafield had published 14 novels and two volumes of short stories, as well as a considerable body of journalism. In that year, Margaret Rhondda commissioned the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* as a new light series for *Time and Tide*, needing a space-filler.¹⁹⁸ Immediately successful, the collected articles were enlarged by 20,000 words for book-length publication; when published in 1930, Delafield’s work was the Book Society Book of the Month choice.¹⁹⁹ In 1931, Delafield’s play *To See Ourselves* was produced at the Ambassador’s Theatre in London; this was followed by a production in 1932, outside the West End, of *The Glass Wall*.²⁰⁰ *Diary of a Provincial Lady* increased Delafield’s reputation and popularity in America and she made two long publicity trips to the USA and Canada, firstly in 1933, this trip forming the basis of *The Provincial Lady in America*.²⁰¹ In 1936 she visited the USSR for some months, including a prolonged and uncomfortable stay at a collective farm; she wrote of this experience in *Straw Without Bricks: I Visit the Soviets* (1937).²⁰²

Delafield’s career as a writer for radio and, subsequently, a broadcaster, developed throughout the 1930s. Her play *To See Ourselves* was adapted for radio and she produced a number of radio plays, including original dramas and adaptations from her own and others’ work.²⁰³ In the character of the Provincial Lady, she broadcast a series of talks entitled *Home is Like That*, and briefly reviewed fiction on the radio.²⁰⁴ In the early years of World War II, her broadcasting career resumed for propaganda purposes; the persona of the Provincial Lady was used to raise morale on the home front.²⁰⁵ Delafield was in demand as a lecturer, and apart from her broadcasting career undertook many speaking engagements;²⁰⁶ judging from archive copies of the brief notes from her wartime lectures, she was a fluent and adept speaker.²⁰⁷ Throughout the 1930s Delafield continued to publish fiction, and began to express greater hopes for the development of her work and its

¹⁹⁵ Powell, p99

¹⁹⁶ McCullen, pv

¹⁹⁷ McCullen, p119

¹⁹⁸ E.M. Delafield, ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’ in *Titles to Fame* ed. by Denys Kilham Roberts (Thomas Nelson and Sons: London, 1937), pp121-138 (p123)

¹⁹⁹ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p129

²⁰⁰ McCullen, pvi; Powell, p114

²⁰¹ Powell, p116

²⁰² Powell, pp124-125

²⁰³ Powell, pp151-153

²⁰⁴ Powell, p156

²⁰⁵ McCullen, pi

²⁰⁶ McCullen, p11

²⁰⁷ E.M. Delafield, ‘Lecture notes’ in E.M. Delafield fonds, Special Collections and Rare Books, University of British Columbia Library (folder 3.7)

reception; she was disappointed with the critical response to *Gay Life*, for example,²⁰⁸ and disputed vigorously, if politely, with her publisher Macmillan over the style and content of *Nothing is Safe*.²⁰⁹ As McCullen has commented, her novels of this period are more innovative in terms of narrative and structure, and her tone and subject matter become darker in novels such as *Faster! Faster!* and *Nothing is Safe*.²¹⁰

Delafield's friendship with the Irish novelist Kate O'Brien began in the early 1930s and had become a close relationship by 1941; O'Brien spent long periods of the last two years of Delafield's life at Croyle, and Delafield visited her at her Oxfordshire home²¹¹. This friendship causes both Powell and McCullen to refer, obliquely, to the nature of Delafield's sexuality. McCullen identifies a "real estrangement" in the Dashwoods' marriage in the 1930s, fostered by Delafield's frequent absences and Paul Dashwood's unromantic character, and suggests that Delafield made her son Lionel the main focus of her affection and attention.²¹² Characterising Kate O'Brien as "mannish" he suggests that Kate's "tremendous" personal and professional admiration for Elizabeth stimulated her to write *Late and Soon*, her last novel, in which Valentine Arbell, a middle-aged widow nursing an acute sense of failure, is reunited with the charming Irishman who was her first love, and they marry.²¹³ "Valentine's complete sense of failure – as mother, wife and woman – before Lonergan's arrival at Coombe parallels Delafield's before Kate entered her life permanently. It requires only a small step to connect the two: Colonel Rory Lonergan stands as a graceful tribute to Kate O'Brien".²¹⁴ McCullen does not explicitly suggest any lesbian relationship between Kate and Elizabeth, although he characterises Delafield's last years as "a kind of rebirth" brought about by their friendship;²¹⁵ however, he romanticises it by identifying Kate as Rory's real-life counterpart. Powell notes that Kate O'Brien was "a rock of support in the last hard years of [Delafield's] life",²¹⁶ and a guest welcomed at Croyle;²¹⁷ she finds it necessary to assert that, although Kate O'Brien is "known to have had lesbian relationships, [...] Elizabeth herself was always interested in men."²¹⁸ Kate O'Brien's biographer Eibhear Walshe "contend[s] that Elizabeth and Kate were lovers".²¹⁹ This assertion is based on a reading of Rory Lonergan in *Late and Soon* as an eroticised portrait of Kate; on Walshe's correspondence with Rosamund Dashwood in 1997, in which Rosamund remembers her own affection for Kate; and on Kate O'Brien's fictional depiction of Delafield as

²⁰⁸ 'The Diary of a Provincial Lady', p131

²⁰⁹ E.M. Dashwood to Macmillan and Co; 25 August 1936. The Macmillan Archive, The British Library. Add. 54972

²¹⁰ McCullen, p70

²¹¹ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: a Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p99

²¹² McCullen, p14

²¹³ McCullen, p113

²¹⁴ McCullen, pp113-114

²¹⁵ McCullen, p113

²¹⁶ Powell, p98

²¹⁷ Powell, p177

²¹⁸ Powell, p980

²¹⁹ Walshe, p100

the central character of *That Lady*, published in 1946.²²⁰ I deal with Delafield's own literary representations of lesbianism in Chapter 2.

At the outbreak of war Delafield put her writing to patriotic use, supporting the war effort through her journalism and a revival of the *Provincial Lady*, who sees out the Phoney War of autumn 1939 working in the canteen of an Air Raid Precautions station. Delafield herself undertook a similar role before being sent, in 1940, on an official Ministry of Information mission to France.²²¹ Possibly as a result of this, she wrote the propaganda booklet *People You Love*, published by the Ministry of Information and intended to garner the support of British women for the war effort.²²² After the death of her son in the war in 1940, she felt unable to write more of the *Provincial Lady's* diaries²²³, but produced two more novels before her death in 1943, both to rather lukewarm reviews.²²⁴

A possible obstacle to the putative love affair between Elizabeth and Kate O'Brien is Delafield's state of health in the 1940s. Lionel Dashwood's death in November 1940 was due to gunshot wounds received while undergoing military training; an open verdict was recorded at the time.²²⁵ Lionel is reported to have been an unhappy young man, "a misfit from early childhood [...] in village eyes, and in his father's, he was a sissy" and McCullen hints that his death was in fact a suicide.²²⁶ As well as grieving for her son, Delafield became ill in 1941 with bowel cancer and underwent surgery in November that year, resulting in a colostomy.²²⁷ She continued to suffer ill-health during 1942 and in spring 1943, after six weeks of bed rest, underwent X-ray treatment in London, returning to Croyle with Kate O'Brien in August 1943.²²⁸ Between August and November 1943 Delafield continued to keep up an active life, but by November Paul Dashwood was advised that he should make her last days "as painless as possible".²²⁹ She died at Croyle on 2 December 1943 and was buried next to her son's grave in Kentisbeare churchyard.²³⁰

The *Diary of a Provincial Lady*: fiction and autobiography

The *Diary of a Provincial Lady* was originally published in serial form in *Time and Tide* and subsequently appeared in as a series of books. There are four separate volumes: the initial *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (first published in book form in 1930), *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (1932), *The Provincial Lady in America* (1934) and *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* (1940). The first volume is

²²⁰ Walshe, pp100-102

²²¹ McCullen, p89

²²² McCullen, p90

²²³ E.M. Dashwood to Macmillan and Co; 24 November 1940. The Macmillan Archive, The British Library. Add. 54972

²²⁴ Powell, pp174-179

²²⁵ Powell, p173

²²⁶ McCullen, p15

²²⁷ Powell, p176

²²⁸ Powell, pp181-183

²²⁹ Powell, p183

²³⁰ Powell, pp184-185

concerned with the nameless protagonist's life in rural Devonshire as an upper-middle-class wife to Robert, a land agent, and mother to Robin and Vicky; there are occasional hints of literary ambition, but the text focuses more on village social life and domestic issues. In the second volume, the Provincial Lady has published a book and is able, on the proceeds, to rent a flat in London and spend more time there; the family is also able to afford a rather unsuccessful holiday in Brittany. The third volume follows the Provincial Lady, now an established writer, on a lecture tour of America. In the final volume she once again takes a flat in London; while seeking war-work from the Ministry of Information, she works in the canteen of an Air Raid Precautions unit. This last volume ends when the Ministry, against all expectations, provides her with a job.

Drawing heavily on the events and personalities of Delafield's own life, and constructed in a form strongly associated with life writing, the Provincial Lady's diaries negotiate the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. According to Philippe Lejeune's definition of the autobiographical contract between reader and writer as summarised by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson,

two things indisputably distinguish autobiography [...] from the novel: the 'vital statistics' of the author, such as date and place of birth and education, are identical to those of the narrator; and an implied contract or 'pact' exists between author and publisher attesting to the truth of the signature. When we recognise the person who claims authorship of the narrative as the protagonist or central figure in the narrative – that is, we believe them to be the same person – we read the text written by the author to whom it refers as reflexive or autobiographical.²³¹

In terms of the primary test of autobiographical status, Delafield's work is ambiguous; her nameless protagonist cannot be definitely identified as identical to the author through her proper name, although both clearly have 'vital statistics' in common such as family structure, social status and professional activities. The ambiguity of the relationship between the nameless Provincial Lady and her author is intensified by the knowledge that Delafield was known by a variety of different names during her life. The character's anonymity, however, ensures there is nothing to stop the reader identifying the Provincial Lady with Delafield herself.

Delafield's choice of the diary form also challenges a directly autobiographical reading of the work. Felicity Nussbaum, considering diary and other serial narrative forms of life-writing, suggests that:

Critical readers of autobiography still assume that the most typical autobiography is one that presents a coherent core of a self with a beginning, middle and end, and that embodies a later self that derives from a former self; thus, nonfictional serial narrative forms, which allow contradictions to coexist without assimilating the dissonance, do not fit autobiographical conventions.²³²

²³¹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p8

²³² Felicity A. Nussbaum, 'Toward Conceptualizing Diary' in *Studies in Autobiography* ed. by James Olney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp 128-140 (p130)

The choice of this form excludes some of the characteristics of autobiography, particularly the prevalent nineteenth-century view of autobiography as a retrospective and teleological narrative of self-development.²³³ All the diaries present the protagonist's experiences *in medias res*, and often have no particular narrative arc; Delafield herself noted that for most of her works, "there seems to be no especial reason why they should begin where they do begin, or leave off where they do leave off. They work up to no particular climax, and lead to no particular conclusion."²³⁴ There are gaps in the narrative accounted for sometimes by illness and sometimes by the interruptions of daily life. *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* has no entries between November 7th and April 13th, as the diarist notes:

Immense and inexplicable lapse of time since diary last received my attention, but on reviewing past five months, can trace no unusual activities, excepting arrears of calls – worked off between January and March on fine afternoons, when there appears to be reasonable chance of finding everybody out.²³⁵

As well as presenting the text as if it had just been written by the protagonist, the serial production of all the volumes of diaries means that they were actually written in that manner by Delafield. The happenstance narrative structures of the diaries, and their lack of retrospective reflection, may limit the seriousness with which they can be read and the extent to which they can be identified as retrospective, teleological autobiographical texts.

Theorists of the diary fiction form have identified its approach to mimesis as one of its defining characteristics.²³⁶ H. Porter Abbott suggests that the diary fiction form is "employed to give the illusion of a literary found object" in which the apparent "artless spontaneity of the internal, nonretrospective record" and the asserted reality of the diary as a document itself contribute to the mimetic effect.²³⁷ As Lorna Martens asserts, diary fiction portrays "what could be a real situation. No other form of narration can achieve comparable closeness between the narrator and the narrated world without being identifiably fictive."²³⁸ Abbott also indicates the mimetic effect of diary writing which gives an illusion of immediacy, that there is no gap in time between the event and its recording in text;²³⁹ diary narrators learn and realise things alongside the reader and our enlightenment keeps pace with that of the narrator.²⁴⁰ If Delafield wishes to articulate the Provincial Lady texts as fiction, as suggested by her own writing about the work, then she has selected a highly mimetic form that is problematic for a traditional autobiographical reading because it lacks teleological development and self-reflection, and also gives the reader a particularly heightened sense of realism from the text.

²³³ H. Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p28

²³⁴ 'The Diary of a Provincial Lady', p123

²³⁵ E.M. Delafield, *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1939 (1932)), p175 (hereafter PLGF)

²³⁶ Abbott, p18

²³⁷ Abbott, pp18-19

²³⁸ Lorna Martens, *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp5-6

²³⁹ Abbott, p28

²⁴⁰ Abbott, pp40-41

Delafield's text generally directly imitates the diary form. Even in book format, there is no effort to structure the diary into chapters (as is done, for example, in *The Diary of a Nobody*, with a summary of the events of each chapter on the contents page and a statement from the diarist articulating his right to publish his diary),²⁴¹ nor is any contextualisation of how or why the diary came to be written provided to guide the reader, at least in the first three volumes. Delafield avoids the use of exposition, intensifying the mimetic effect of her text. On the first page of the *Diary*, we are introduced to Lady Boxe; Delafield economically conveys her protagonist's dislike of Lady Boxe with the phrase "I say, untruthfully, how nice it is to see her",²⁴² but it is not until several pages later that we discover that Lady Boxe is, in fact, her husband's employer and is not simply making a social call.²⁴³ Readers must rely on the familiarity of the Provincial Lady's context to identify her husband and children; incidental characters such as Barbara Blenkinsop and Our Vicar's Wife are delineated through their conversation and behaviour, and the reactions of others:

At eleven our Vicar's wife says that she *does* hope the lights of the two-seater are still in order, and gets as far as the hall-door. There we talk about forthcoming village concert, parrot-disease, and the Bishop of the diocese [...] Robert inhospitably says, let us put out the lights and fasten up the hall-door and go up to bed immediately, in case she comes back for anything.²⁴⁴

Delafield also maintains mimesis through the presentation of diary entries. Labelling her entries solely with the month and date helps avoid impossible dates, and even in *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* which is specifically dated to 1939, she does not use days of the week. Entries occur at fairly regular intervals, although sometimes there are gaps, which may be accounted for as noted above; in other cases they go unexplained. Longer entries occur when there is the need to describe significant or interesting events – the dinner party at which the Provincial Lady meets a former admirer, for example, runs over twelve pages – but a typical entry in the early volumes is around two pages.²⁴⁵ In the later volumes, entries are longer, Delafield recording conversations at length usually to achieve satirical effect. For example, in *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* her protagonist records very long monologues uttered by Pussy Winter-Gammon, a satirical portrait of a self-interested woman whose conversation consists only of self-aggrandisement. The Provincial Lady makes her dislike of such characters plain, but records their conversation to amuse and appal the reader while constructing a critique of their undesirable personality traits and habits, such as conceit and namedropping. These long diary entries inhibit Delafield's mimetic effect, as it is difficult to believe that the Provincial Lady would devote time and energy to recording so much of Mrs. Winter-Gammon's conversation, which usually leaves the diarist feeling she has "scarcely ever been so near committing murder in my life".²⁴⁶ Additionally, such entries give the impression that they

²⁴¹ George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965 (1892)), pp7, 15

²⁴² E.M. Delafield, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (London: Macmillan, 1931 (1930)), p1 (hereafter *DPL*)

²⁴³ *DPL*, p17

²⁴⁴ *DPL*, pp97-98

²⁴⁵ *PLGF*, pp194-205

²⁴⁶ E.M. Delafield, *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* (London: Macmillan, 1940), p142 (hereafter *PLWT*)

could not have been written in the time available to Delafield's protagonist. Through all these means, the longer diary entries serve to remind the reader of the diary's fictional status.

Poststructuralist criticism of autobiography questions the possibility of authentic representations of the self, and the relationship between autobiography and fiction. As Smith and Watson suggest, if the autonomous self is an illusion, and the self can only be a split subject constituted in language, then "the origins and history of the self [...] are fictions, although the history of utterances of that fiction can be traced".²⁴⁷ This presents a challenge to the reading of autobiography as other than fictions, although Laura Marcus, drawing on the work of Philip Eakin, has proposed that fictions are to be understood as part of the truth of autobiographical writings; narrative forms are a constitutive part of human identity.²⁴⁸ Marcus relates this proposition to Hayden White's theories of history as fiction, and suggests that fiction and autobiography need no longer be considered as "antithetical structures".²⁴⁹ Marcus considers autobiography an unstable form with contestable boundaries, appearing either as "a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation".²⁵⁰ The *Provincial Lady's* diaries are positioned at one of autobiography's contestable boundaries, moving between verifiable fact and identifiable fiction, and incorporating considerable areas of ambiguity in which meaning might be autobiographical or fictive. I argue that the liminal position of this text enables Delafield to create ambiguity regarding the feminist import of her writing in order to maintain a middlebrow narrative that encompasses conservative acceptability, humour and subversive political meaning.

There is some information available regarding Delafield's own views of the positioning of her text. Delafield outlined her approach to the autobiography/fiction boundary in a chapter on the origins of the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* included in Denys Kilham Roberts's *Titles to Fame*, a book which asks 10 "eminent" novelists to write a "biography" of one of their most successful books.²⁵¹ In this text, Delafield disclaims the autobiographical quality of the *Diary*: "The *Provincial Lady* herself was never intended as a self-portrait [...] Robert was intended to represent the average English husband [...] Robin and Vicky were mild likenesses of my own two children at that date."²⁵² In later volumes, however, the overlap between Delafield's own life and the events depicted in the diary begin to increase. In *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* Delafield "lifted many more incidents from real life than I had in the first volume".²⁵³ By this time Delafield was renting her Doughty Street flat and her experiences of literary London form part of her protagonist's life, identified in

²⁴⁷ Smith and Watson, pp132-133

²⁴⁸ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p244

²⁴⁹ Laura Marcus, p244

²⁵⁰ Laura Marcus, p7

²⁵¹ Denys Kilham Roberts (ed), *Titles to Fame* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1937), pxvi

²⁵² 'The *Diary of a Provincial Lady*', p127

²⁵³ 'The *Diary of a Provincial Lady*', p132

this volume as the author of a “minute and unpretentious literary effort”.²⁵⁴ *The Provincial Lady in America* replicates Delafield’s experience of a lecture tour in the USA and Canada very closely.

As Delafield’s essay about her text demonstrates, she combined, intentionally, autobiographical content with fictional representations. Writing about the inspiration for Pamela Pringle (a beautiful and fashionable woman who features mainly in *The Provincial Lady Goes Further*, by which time she has married her third husband), Delafield explains that she “was an exaggerated version of an extraordinarily pretty girl whom I met when she and I were both under twenty. She was then only engaged to be married, but somehow, I felt that her love-life was unlikely to end there.”²⁵⁵ The character of her children’s French governess, Mademoiselle, was “a composite portrait of at least three French governesses, all of them dating back to my own childhood”.²⁵⁶ By Delafield’s own account, then, there is a strong fictional element running through the *Diary*, particularly in terms of its characterisation. However, although the Provincial Lady’s life becomes increasingly similar to that of her creator, she is not acknowledged as an autobiographical representation. I consider below some of the ways in which the *Diary* may be read as autobiographical or as fictive, and the ways in which Delafield uses both approaches to articulate feminist meaning in her work, while maintaining an ambiguous position on the status of the text which enables a similar ambiguity that can disguise political expression.

One way of investigating the biographical or fictive status of the text is to consider the relationship of Delafield’s husband, Paul Dashwood, to the Provincial Lady’s husband Robert. As noted above, the family life and relationships of the Provincial Lady are essentially identical to those of Delafield herself. Their family home is a sizeable house in a Devon village, but not the largest house there, which belongs to the objectionable Lady Boxe; Robert, like Paul, works as a land agent.²⁵⁷ The relationship between Paul and the character of Robert in the *Diary* has been given some critical consideration. Delafield herself, as noted above, considered Robert to be a literary type, the average Englishman. In her introduction to the Virago edition of the *Diary*, Nicola Beauman suggests that

the Provincial Lady’s marriage is depressingly unharmonious. There can only be one explanation – that E.M. Delafield was so wary of putting any of her husband’s characteristics into her weekly columns that she chose to turn Robert into someone unbelievable, so aloof and uninterested that no one could imagine for a moment that he had any resemblance to reality.²⁵⁸

McCullen, however, records that Paul wrote, in his copy of *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, “Paul Dashwood/12.2.30/ (Robert)”, showing that he acknowledged the resemblance, and notes that the Dashwood family were unhappy at the caricature; McCullen extrapolates from this that Robert

²⁵⁴ *PLGF*, p1

²⁵⁵ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p133

²⁵⁶ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p127

²⁵⁷ *DPL*, p17

²⁵⁸ Nicola Beauman, ‘Introduction’ in *Diary of a Provincial Lady* by E.M. Delafield (London: Virago, 1984), ppvii-xvii (pxiii)

himself must have been hurt by his portrait,²⁵⁹ but also notes that Paul Dashwood, like his wife, was a model for the illustrations to the first volume,²⁶⁰ suggesting at least a benign attitude to the text. Robert and Paul share some characteristics. The biographical Paul Dashwood is characterised as “unemotional and unromantic”.²⁶¹ Robert dislikes fuss and emotionalism, and his moods sometimes need to be managed by his wife: “Robert adopts unsympathetic attitude and says ‘This is Waste of Time and Money. Do not know if he means cables, or journey to meet ship, but feel sure better not to enquire.’”²⁶² The Provincial Lady occasionally has reason to be proud of her husband, as when he does well at a party game at Lady Boxe’s;²⁶³ she certainly misses him, and he her, during her trip to America; and he can occasionally be sympathetic, if tactless. When his wife is leaving to convalesce in Bude after an illness, he asks her “You don’t think you’re going there to *die*, do you?”²⁶⁴ which in fact is a reasonable assessment of her state of mind, although bluntly expressed in a manner that can easily be reconciled with the “practical, realistic” biographical Paul.²⁶⁵ In other ways, however, the characters diverge. Paul, as noted above, was an enthusiastic reader of Delafield’s work before they met, and continued to read her books with enjoyment afterwards. Robert does read the Provincial Lady’s “minute literary effort” but his response is not effusive: “he says that It is Funny – but does not look amused”.²⁶⁶ Paul had a fondness for animals not, apparently shared by Robert, from whom the arrival of kittens must be kept secret.²⁶⁷ Paul also seems more sociable than Robert, who dislikes all visitors except for his wife’s friend Felicity; Paul seems to have found only Delafield’s sister and the “more literary of his wife’s friends” difficult to welcome.²⁶⁸ Paul Dashwood’s characteristics, even if fairly represented, are of course exaggerated for comic effect: Robert repeatedly falls asleep downstairs, his most frequent conversational gambit is “It Depends”, and his inattention to his wife’s emotional needs recurs throughout the diaries. When the Provincial Lady is agitated at the thought of meeting an old flame, “Robert nods, and walks out through the window into the garden”.²⁶⁹ The lack of harmony and mutual responsiveness within their marriage can be read as a mild feminist critique of the notion that husband and family should provide sufficient interest and satisfaction for any woman.

As a literary character, Robert is frequently off-stage, appearing in the diary only when the Provincial Lady’s hopes and plans require the threat of frustration, when he can undercut her excitement with a bathetic remark, or when he is a useful comic foil for domestic misfortune. All

²⁵⁹ McCullen, p14

²⁶⁰ McCullen, p60

²⁶¹ McCullen, p34

²⁶² *DPL*, p25

²⁶³ *DPL*, p22

²⁶⁴ *DPL*, p165

²⁶⁵ McCullen, p6

²⁶⁶ *PLGF*, p1

²⁶⁷ Powell, p138; *DPL*, p80

²⁶⁸ Powell, pp138-139

²⁶⁹ *PLGF*, p192

three literary roles come to the fore when a bad smell invades the bathroom in *The Provincial Lady in America*, and we see Robert for once in his element:

Robert, coming up hours later, wakes me in order to enquire whether I noticed anything when I was having my bath? Am obliged to admit that I did, and he says this means taking up the whole of the flooring, and he'll take any bet it's a dead rat [...] Just as we [the Provincial Lady and a visitor, Mrs Tressider] reach the top landing, Robert appears in shirt-sleeves, at bathroom door, and says that *half* a dead rat has been found, and the other half can't be far off. Have only too much reason to think that this is probably true. Robert then sees Mrs T, is introduced, but – rightly – does not shake hands, and we talk about dead rat until gong sounds for tea.²⁷⁰

The dead rat gives Robert an opportunity to undertake, effectively, a practical task; to emphasise the lack of romantic conversation in the Provincial Lady's bedroom; and to lead her into one of the recurrent socially awkward situations which pepper her diary and generate much of its comedy. The juxtaposition of raw domesticity, social interaction with a stranger and the class expectation that servants would be available to Robert and his wife to deal with the rat aligns the text with other examples of middlebrow humorous writing. Nicola Beauman's reading of Robert as a deliberately extreme caricature designed to prevent the identification of Robert with Paul Dashwood, and McCullen's view that the characterisation of Robert was both biographically accurate and also personally hurtful to Paul, can be supplemented by a third reading in which the characteristics of the biographical Paul have been exaggerated and reiterated in order to create a comic literary persona. This reading supports an argument for feminist meaning within the text: if Robert is Paul, the feminist impact of Delafield's satire of marriage is diminished: any critique of Robert is simply critique of Paul rather than of the conditions of marriage. If Robert is an average Englishman, the argument is strengthened. The ambiguous biographical status of Robert/Paul allows Delafield to establish two possible readings of her feminist critique of marriage, one in which its argument is emphasised, one in which it is effaced. I argue that this duality and ambiguity allowed Delafield to ensure a satisfactory reception of her works given the potentially broad range of political opinion across the large middlebrow audience for the Provincial Lady novels, and to maintain more radical and more conservative readings of her texts.

The diaries are also concerned with the development of a woman writer's career, and in this respect the Provincial Lady's life closely parallels that of her author. As well as attending the same events and parties, and having a similar home and family life, the Provincial Lady experiences, as Delafield did after the publication of *Zella Sees Herself*, the excitement of earning her own money through her writing. This representation of the newly-successful author's experiences is strongly autobiographical. The Provincial Lady's rather humble attitude to her literary career - her immediate response to a request from a newspaper for an article on Modern Freedom in Marriage is that "they must have made a mistake"²⁷¹ - is also echoed in Delafield's own writings about her work; she refers to her "limited range" and suggests that she "can lay no claim to have formed my

²⁷⁰ E.M. Delafield, *The Provincial Lady in America* (London: Macmillan, 1939 (1932)), p11 (hereafter *PLA*)

²⁷¹ *PLGF*, p267

style on any of the great models, or been influenced by high and idealistic motives, in writing”.²⁷² Carolyn Heilbrun has noted of women autobiographers: “to a striking degree they fail directly to emphasise their own importance, though writing in a genre which implies self-assertion and self-display”; the tradition of women’s autobiographies was to emphasise service to causes beyond the self, not the self itself.²⁷³ Both Delafield’s own overtly autobiographical writings and the *Provincial Lady*’s private diary operate within this tradition, avoiding any accusations of self-display. Delafield’s humorous mode of writing, based on a dry and reticent mode of self-expression, also allows her to avoid self-assertion. This reticence also ensures that the potential feminist assertiveness of the act of creating an autobiographical self is masked, and potentially only legible to the engaged and sympathetic reader, while the conservative reader remains reassured that the writer continues to embody appropriate feminine modes of self-expression. Delafield’s reticence is perhaps what allows McCullen to disclaim her feminism because her writing lacks “shrillness and acrimony”;²⁷⁴ McCullen’s reading of her as non-feminist shows how Delafield’s ambiguous textual constructions allow for a more conservative reading of her work to be established.

During *The Provincial Lady in America* the professional lives of author and protagonist become almost identical. Delafield wrote the book during her own tour of Canada and the USA, sending it home in instalments: “As I was travelling almost all the time it was difficult to get it written, and more difficult still to get it typed. The easiest method, in the end, proved to be sitting up in bed before breakfast with my portable typewriter on my knee.”²⁷⁵ In this volume the professional positions of Delafield and her protagonist have equalised: the *Provincial Lady* is sufficiently valuable to her American publishers that she is allowed to travel out in first class accommodation.²⁷⁶ As well as lecturing and giving readings from her work, the *Provincial Lady* is of interest to the local media on her arrival in New York (“Am interviewed by reporters on five different occasions”) and sufficiently celebrated to receive many offers of hospitality:

Telephone bell rings incessantly from nine o’clock onwards, invitations pour in, and complete strangers ring up to say that they liked my book, and would be glad to give a party for me at any hour of the day or night. Am plunged by all this into a state of bewilderment, but feel definitely that it will be a satisfaction to let a number of people at home hear about it all, and realise estimation in which professional writers are held in America.²⁷⁷

As well as identifying herself as a professional writer, the protagonist is reflecting Delafield’s own reactions to the change in status that accompanies the publication of a bestseller; her correspondence after the publication of *Diary of a Provincial Lady* “served to give one some idea of what the post bag of a real celebrity must be like.”²⁷⁸ Because this volume of the diaries was written during the visit to America, with Delafield’s protagonist undergoing the same experiences as her

²⁷² ‘E.M. Delafield’, p75, p78

²⁷³ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing: a Woman’s Life* (London: The Women’s Press, 1988), p23

²⁷⁴ McCullen, p119

²⁷⁵ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p137

²⁷⁶ *PLA*, p204

²⁷⁷ *PLA*, pp56-57

²⁷⁸ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p132

creator, some of the commentary is more immediate in tone and more strongly expressed: “Reach Toronto at preposterous hour of 5.55 A.M. and decide against night-travelling once and for ever [...] eyelids feel curiously stiff and intelligence at lowest possible ebb.”²⁷⁹ Delafield may have been candid about her own experiences of travel, but she later acknowledged that she was concerned to be “kind rather than funny” about America and Americans; this led her to introduce “a sprinkling of purely imaginary personalities, and to bestow upon them the kind of generic qualities that are to be found in any collection of any people, of almost any race. The result was not specially convincing.”²⁸⁰ Delafield’s American acquaintances vary between generous descriptions of those based in reality, and slightly grotesque characters introduced for humorous purposes such as the egregious namedropper Katherine Ellen Blatt, with her utter lack of respect for the needs of others. This leads to a more marked division between the parts of the text that might be genuinely autobiographical and those that are more evidently fictional. Delafield’s description of her visit to friends in Chicago is mild and kind-hearted, but not particularly amusing: “Feel quite convinced that I have known Arthur, his family, his New York friend and his dog all my life. They treat me with incredible kindness and hospitality, and introduce me to all their friends”.²⁸¹ Describing her first meeting with Miss Blatt, however, she takes an entirely different approach:

Miss B. has a great deal to say, and fortunately seems to expect very little answer, as my mind is entirely fixed on letters lying unopened in my handbag. She tells me, amongst other things, that Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham – whom she calls ‘Willie’, which I think profane – the Duchess of Atholl, Sir Gerald du Maurier and Miss Amy Johnson are all very dear friends of hers, and she would never dream of letting a year pass without going to England and paying each of them a visit. I say rather curtly that I don’t know any of them, and add that I don’t really feel I ought to take up any more of Miss Blatt’s time. That, declares Miss Blatt, doesn’t matter at all. I’m not to let that worry me for a moment.²⁸²

The Provincial Lady has regular encounters with comic characters who talk a great deal more than they listen; this allows her to develop her humorous mode of expression in which she says very little or nothing at all, the comedy of the situation emerging from her reticence or silence. In the *Provincial Lady in America*, although the narrative of the diary is strongly autobiographical, and the circumstances in which it was produced replicated actual diary-writing very exactly, autobiographical meaning becomes elusive because of Delafield’s recourse to satirical representations of the verbose and insensitive.

The relationship of Delafield’s readership to the *Diary*, and its reception, both affect its position at the boundary between autobiographical fictions. Jane Marcus argues that there is

a special relationship between the female writer and her reader in women’s autobiographies, reproducing a natural, intimate conversation between women that is simultaneously personal and social [...] We are invited to participate in the process of mutual resurrection of our pasts,

²⁷⁹ *PLA*, p131

²⁸⁰ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, pp136-7

²⁸¹ *PLA*, p86

²⁸² *PLA*, p73

to follow her example and to contribute an analysis of our own struggles with memory and truth.²⁸³

Women's autobiographies may ask questions of the reader, inviting a response and therefore a contribution to the construction of the autobiographical narrative and of the autobiographical subject herself. Smith and Watson develop the idea of the autobiographical pact to encompass a reader-writer contract that allows a different set of reader expectations to be established by autobiographical writing, which becomes "an intersubjective process that occurs within the reader/writer pact, rather than [...] a true-or-false story; the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding".²⁸⁴ Diary readers are also privileged as participants in the act of recreation of the writing subject's world; they are able to share the diary author's self-reflective narration, which may stimulate acts of interiority and self-making in the reader. Diary writers can engender a closer proximity to, and intimacy with, their readers; the writer is not different from a reader because she is a writer, rather she is like the reader, since both are reflecting on the meaning of the diarist's life narration.

The Diary begins with the planting of the indoor bulbs, an annual rite for Delafield "and every other woman of my acquaintance";²⁸⁵ this establishes the Provincial Lady as a representative of a certain type of middle-class women. Delafield uses the representation of almost ritual domestic acts to establish connections to real women and to her readers, who could reasonably be expected to identify with, and be ruefully amused by, the Provincial Lady's difficulties with servants, travel, her wardrobe and her overdraft. Delafield structures the diary, even when it begins to move away from common domestic events, so that likely shared experiences punctuate the narrative: a literary party will be followed by the need to get a new hat; an afternoon's writing in London is interrupted by the housekeeper with the laundry-book. She also, literally, asks questions of the reader when she makes use of regular, rhetorical Queries in parenthesis:

(*Query*: Is not theory mistaken, which attributes idle and profitless day-dreaming to youth? Should be much more inclined to add it to many unsuitable and unprofitable weaknesses of middle-age.)²⁸⁶

These queries invite a response from the reader, and serve to develop that intimate conversation between diarist and reader that Jane Marcus finds characteristic of women's autobiographies. Delafield's repeated focus on experiences likely to be common to her reader also helps establish a shared understanding of the narrative's authenticity and accuracy. The reader response to the *Diary*

²⁸³ Jane Marcus, 'Invincible Mediocrity: the private selves of public women' in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* ed. by Shari Benstock (London: Routledge, 1988), pp114-146 (p133)

²⁸⁴ Smith and Watson, p13

²⁸⁵ 'The Diary of a Provincial Lady', p125

²⁸⁶ *PLGF*, p60

in book form was greater than any other Delafield had known. “To a large extent, almost all of [the letters] said in effect the same thing: This is an exact transcription of my own life.”²⁸⁷

Establishing this shared understanding and reader identification with the Provincial Lady was, initially, facilitated by the serial publication in *Time and Tide*. Although information about *Time and Tide* readers is limited, no subscriber records being available, it is evident from advertisements for clothes and prestigious department stores in the magazine during the late 1920s that the readership was predominantly female and middle-class.²⁸⁸ Delafield fosters reader identification with the Provincial Lady, particularly in the first volume, by regular references to reading *Time and Tide*. The Provincial Lady enters the *Time and Tide* literary competitions, is irked by her sister-in-law Angela’s success²⁸⁹ and is driven to writing, under a false name, to the Editor when she is obliged to share the first prize with another entrant.²⁹⁰ The intertextual jokes Delafield makes relating to *Time and Tide* and initially published in its pages are a means of connecting intimately with her readers and making an assumption of a shared attitude towards the periodical and its politics. In this volume, like her readers, the Provincial Lady is a consumer of the periodical and not a contributor; her enthusiasm for the magazine can be read as an endorsement of its feminist principles. The protagonist’s identification as provincial also suggests to the reader that feminism is not only an issue for metropolitan, professional women, but has relevance both in rural life and in domestic and family life. The events of the Provincial Lady’s life were recognised and owned by her readers; the context in which they were first read, and the intertextual references to the magazine reinforce this.

In later volumes the Provincial Lady’s relationship with *Time and Tide* converges with Delafield’s own, as she is asked to help organise and attend a *Time and Tide* party in her official capacity as a professional writer:

Someone produces small label bearing name by which I am – presumably – known to readers of *Time and Tide*, and this I pin to my frock [...] Several hundred millions then invade the Hotel, and are shaken hands with by Editor and myself.²⁹¹

This change of relationship is likely to have diminished the readers’ sense of identification with the Provincial Lady, and begins to conflate Delafield’s protagonist with the author. This is particularly true of those who read this entry in serial form in *Time and Tide*, as Delafield also wrote a report of the party that appeared, separately from the Provincial Lady’s account, under her own name in the magazine; this is an intertextual joke, but one which is more likely to develop the identification of Delafield with her protagonist, since they are both attending the same, real-world, events.²⁹² *The Provincial Lady in America*, detailing as it does experiences that the majority of Delafield’s readers could not expect to share, limits still further the possibilities for identification with the heroine. Interestingly, Delafield’s protagonist regains her Everywoman status in the early parts of *The*

²⁸⁷ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p131

²⁸⁸ Jill Allbrooke, ‘The Life and Times of *Time and Tide*’, *Serials*, 8, no.1 (1995) 72-75, (p75)

²⁸⁹ *DPL*, p49

²⁹⁰ *DPL*, pp79-80

²⁹¹ *PLGF*, pp239-240

²⁹² Powell, p99

Provincial Lady in War-Time; working at the Adelphi Air Raid Precautions (ARP) unit, the Provincial Lady is entirely separated from her literary professional life and her war-work has a more mundane quality than she expected, although it is initially satisfying:

Return from Canteen after evening of activity which has given me agreeable illusion that I am now wholly indispensable to the Allies in the conduct of the war.

Canteen responsibilities, so far as I am concerned, involve much skipping about with orders, memorising prices of different brands of cigarette – which mostly have tiresome halfpenny tacked on to round sum, making calculation difficult – and fetching of fried eggs, rashers, sausages-and-mashed and Welsh rarebits from kitchen.²⁹³

She also disclaims to her Canteen colleagues any suggestion that she has a literary career: “Mrs Peacock [...] has an idea – cannot say why, or whence derived – that I know something about books. Find myself denying it as though confronted with highly scandalous accusation.”²⁹⁴ The Provincial Lady’s wartime reappearance was commissioned by Harold Macmillan,²⁹⁵ and McCullen identifies Delafield’s motives in writing this book as patriotic: “her strategy aimed at defusing the anxiety of her countrywomen by dealing with surface incongruities of this new social upheaval just as she had always done”.²⁹⁶ Through her work at the Adelphi, and her accommodation of evacuees at home, the Provincial Lady becomes a pattern for appropriate patriotic behaviour. Thankfully she is sufficiently bad at her war-work not to be an irritating paragon:

Austere woman who came on duty at midnight confronts me with a desiccated-looking slice of bread and asks coldly if I cut that?

Yes, I did.

Do I realise that one of those long loaves ought to cut up into thirty-two slices, and that, at the rate I’m doing it, not more than twenty-four could possibly be achieved?

Can only apologise, and undertake – rashly, as I subsequently discover – to do better in future.²⁹⁷

Other aspects of the text, however, emphasise that the war-time diary is the record of a professional writer’s experiences. There are many questions from her friends and family, who expect her to undertake a more sophisticated form of war-work: “Felicity concludes with wistful supposition that *I* am doing something splendid”;²⁹⁸ “Rose simply replies that it’s too frightful the way we’re all hanging about wasting our time and doing nothing whatever.”²⁹⁹ The Provincial Lady is urged by her agent to produce a new novel, and a contact at the Ministry of Information insists that “Authors, poets, artists – (can see that the word he really has in mind is riff-raff) – and All You People must really come into line and be content to carry on exactly as usual. Otherwise, simply

²⁹³ *PLWT*, p114

²⁹⁴ *PLWT*, p124

²⁹⁵ Powell, p164

²⁹⁶ McCullen, p58

²⁹⁷ *PLWT*, p123

²⁹⁸ *PLWT*, p98

²⁹⁹ *PLWT*, p147

doing more harm than good.”³⁰⁰ The Provincial Lady’s difficulties in finding a form of war service suited to her skills are shared by other characters and indeed were a common experience during the Phoney War, but her escape from the Adelphi is due to her literary abilities:

Am startled as never before on receiving notification that my services as a writer are required, and may even take me abroad. Am unable to judge whether activities will permit of my continuing a diary but prefer to suppose that they will be of too important a nature.³⁰¹

This rather exciting development takes the Provincial Lady well out of the range of reader identification, and moves her towards the role of heroine undertaking the long-sought work of national importance. Her experiences at the Adelphi and eventual success in finding work that will use her skills also make a feminist point: war-work for women needs to draw on their strengths and abilities, rather than their stereotypical social roles. However, this point is made within a text which demonstrates the traditional, domestic roles of women in war-time through the character of Aunt Blanche and the activities of the other women who work at the Adelphi. In this final volume, Delafield is putting her writing to various purposes: a patriotic attempt to engage her women readers with the war effort; a continued, if mild, criticism of women’s relationship to professional life; and a satire of the social changes occasioned by the outbreak of war. The novel’s increasing focus on how the protagonist will be able contribute to the war effort as a writer, and the specificity of the Provincial Lady’s eventual war service, shift the approach of the work away from fiction and towards autobiographical writing.

Delafield’s approach to the relationship between autobiography and fiction in the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* and its sequels exploits the advantages of both genres in a strategic manner to achieve feminist meaning in her work. Through transitions between autobiographical and fictional modes of writing, Delafield is able to ironise and satirise key aspects of women’s lives, whether generic or personal. While, by her own account, she often reproduced the circumstances and events of her life in the diaries, her writing moves into fictional mode to create humour and satire. This has the additional benefit of avoiding offence to those portrayed, however much of themselves they may recognise in her work. Delafield’s choice of the diary form also supports her transitions between fictional and autobiographical modes of writing, allowing her protagonist to deal with personal and general issues, blending the verifiable with constructed fictional content, and supporting the development of her initially generic protagonist into a defined and individualised character. The intersubjectivity of the *Diary* is of particular relevance given the significance of the reader in the categorisation of works as middlebrow; by stimulating intersubjectivity, whether through allowing reader identification with her protagonist or establishing her as a role model, Delafield foregrounds the importance of the reader in constituting the meaning of her works. Just as each reader’s relationship with the Provincial Lady generates varying levels of empathy and affection, it also affects the way the political meaning of the Provincial Lady narratives is

³⁰⁰ *PLWT*, p237

³⁰¹ *PLWT*, p312

understood. The intersubjective understanding (or ignorance) of Delafield's feminist meaning is another means by which her texts achieve an ambiguity that allows multiple readings of her political positions to emerge. These multiple readings affect the complex representation of exteriority and interiority, and the emergence of the Provincial Lady as an individual subject, throughout the *Diary*.

The development of individual subjectivity in the *Diary*

The authenticity of the autobiographical self, and of autobiographical writing as a means of developing and maintaining an authentic subjectivity, is contested. Poststructuralist critics have identified the subject in autobiographical writing as elusive: autobiography is a paradox that seeks to establish an authentic and durable subjectivity but which requires, in its production, a division of the self. Fissures appear in autobiographical writing, as there are two referents for the first-person narrative, the *I* that writes and the past *I* being written about. Autobiographical narrative is focused on the past and not on the present. Autobiographical selves suffer from the forcible split imposed during the Lacanian mirror stage of self-making: making the *I* the subject of the writing *I* requires a constant process of distancing, separation and reconstitution that brings "a recognition of the alienating force within the specular (the 'regard') that leads to the desperate shoring-up of the reflected image against disintegration and division" and a repression of the split in the subject.³⁰² These pairings, and the gaps between them, are often concealed from the reader and the writer, through the presentation of narrative constructing a whole, but counterfeit self. This type of holistic, integrated autobiography is associated by writers such as Shari Benstock with masculine autobiographers.³⁰³ Feminist scholars such as Susan Stanford Friedman have contended that women's autobiographical writing draws on a relational model of selfhood for women, in which women experience and construct the self in relation to others, and do not necessarily differentiate themselves from others as men do.³⁰⁴ As Friedman suggests, women's autobiographical meanings can be unreadable when interpreted in the context of an autobiographical theory which depends on the distinct, differentiated self posited by earlier theorists; a woman's autobiographical self "does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community".³⁰⁵ A relational approach to the writing and reading of autobiography "undermines the understanding of life narrative as a bounded story of the unique, individuated narrating subject".³⁰⁶ The authentic and whole autobiographical self, then, is challenged by both theoretical and feminist theories of life writing.

³⁰² Shari Benstock, 'Authorising the Autobiographical' in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1988) ed. by Shari Benstock, pp 10-33 (p15)

³⁰³ Benstock, p19

³⁰⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice' in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiography* ed. by Benstock, pp 34-62 (p42)

³⁰⁵ Friedman, p50

³⁰⁶ Smith and Watson, p67

Commentators have, however, identified the ways in which subjectivities can be constituted by autobiographical writing, in the context of subjectivities which are relational, fragmented and rendered inauthentic by the act of autobiography itself. Eakin has identified the act of narration as an act of self-making;³⁰⁷ Smith and Watson argue that the interior self may narrate its own history of a self-observed, personally experienced subjectivity, in the context of an exterior self that may be defined by relations with others, including other earlier selves.³⁰⁸ They construct the body as a site of autobiographical knowledge and presentation of subjectivity through its perception and internalisation of experience, and the representation of this in autobiographical writing: “Subjectivity is impossible unless the subject recognises her location in the materiality of an ever-present body.”³⁰⁹ Germaine Brée has suggested that the tendency of women to construct autobiographical writings using various forms of literary subterfuge, such as presentation as fiction or as the biography of another, may facilitate the perception of an authentic self: “Yet the reader’s experience of an autonomous voice narrating a life may be strongest where the self is apparently suppressed, suggesting that *for the woman writer*, the tactic of writing in the shadow of an Other can be an act of liberation from the constraints of conventional accounts of female lives.”³¹⁰ Women’s subjectivity may also be more concerned with identity rather than individual selfhood: “A woman cannot, [Sheila] Rowbotham argues, experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined *as woman*, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture.”³¹¹ There may, then, be possibilities of presenting in autobiographical writing an authentic *identity* as opposed to a discrete authentic *subjectivity*, and also possibilities of creating ambiguous readings which may present either identity or subjectivity depending on the position of the reader and the strategies of the author.

Diary writing also presents difficulties for autobiographical readings, challenging notions of authentic and integrated self-representation. As discussed above, the temporal nature of diary writing is opposed to the notion of autobiographical retrospective; the episodic and fragmented text disrupts presentations of a continuous self. Diarists can only review a day, a short period, not a lifetime; separate experiences recorded separately may disrupt the idea of a coherent self. However, as Nussbaum suggests, it is also possible that “[t]he diarist [...] may record himself in order to produce an enabling fiction of a coherent and continuous identity; or he may record himself and recognize, to the contrary, that the self is not the same yesterday, today and tomorrow”;³¹² diary writing may be another form of literary production in which the disparity between the writing *I* and the *I* of the narrative is explored, exposed or masked. The position of diary texts at the margins of literature, as “unauthorised discourse” can allow them a greater subversion, a freedom from the

³⁰⁷ Laura Marcus, p244

³⁰⁸ Smith and Watson, p5

³⁰⁹ Smith and Watson, p38

³¹⁰ Germaine Brée, ‘Autogynography’ in *Studies in Autobiography* ed. by James Olney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp 171-179, (p183). Emphasis in original

³¹¹ Friedman, p38

³¹² Nussbaum, p134

formal unities required of other narratives, and the possibility of “modes of discourse that may subvert and endanger authorised representations of reality in its form as well as its discourse of self or subject.”³¹³ Diaries can be viewed as ambiguous literary spaces in which the difficulties of constitution of identity or subjectivity are negotiated, avoided, or simply ignored. Delafield’s choice of the marginal, ambiguous diary form for use within the middlebrow cultural category makes legible various possibilities for her protagonist to demonstrate a generic identity and specific subjectivity.

Delafield divides her work into two distinct groups: “the books I have written ‘from within’ and those from without”; writing “from within” is created by an internal compulsion to tell the story, while writing “from without” is stimulated by external circumstances or demands.³¹⁴ Presumably the commission for *Diary of a Provincial Lady* falls into the “from without” category; by 1937, when *Titles to Fame* was published, Delafield had continued to produce the *Diary* as a serial and three volumes had been published by Macmillan in book form. If Delafield did not feel compelled “from within” to tell the Provincial Lady’s story, the demands “from without” – from *Time and Tide*, from her readers and for the income generated by the work – must have been sufficiently motivating for her to devote a considerable part of her writing energies to its production. The idea of “from without” books can be related to Q.D. Leavis’s association of the middlebrow with the economic circumstances of its production; Delafield very evidently wrote these books for money. A “from without” book may also suggest that the possibility of the representation of interiority and the individual self is inhibited, since its origins are not to be found within the author’s own creative impulse. However, as I demonstrate below, the categorisation of the Provincial Lady works as middlebrow does not preclude Delafield’s establishment of her protagonist as a writing subject. But rather than sustaining an ambiguous representation of identity and subjectivity throughout the Provincial Lady novels, I argue that Delafield’s text makes legible the Provincial Lady’s transition from generic identity to individual selfhood, albeit through a reticent representation of interiority which often compromises and effaces her protagonist’s subjectivity, and within a marginalised form which itself challenges the representation of the authentic subject.

The early volumes of the Provincial Lady’s diaries can be read as establishing a generic identity at the expense of representing an individual subjectivity. The narrative and the narrator suppress the expression of interiority through articulation of emotional response, individual desires and personally specific thoughts and ideas; instead, the experiences of the Provincial Lady, and her response to them, might often be those of any middle-class wife and mother of the period. Delafield wrote later of her intention to produce a “perfectly straightforward account of the many disconcerting facts presented by everyday life to the average woman”; she identified the opening scene, in which her protagonist plants the winter bulbs, as a generic experience of her

³¹³ Nussbaum, pp 136-137

³¹⁴ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p122

contemporaries: “as every other woman of my acquaintance was, or had been doing, exactly the same thing at that particular time of year for almost as many years as I could remember, it seemed fairly probable that indoor bulbs played a part in the lives of most provincial ladies”.³¹⁵ In *Diary of a Provincial Lady* the protagonist is presented with a sequence of “disconcerting facts”: a visit from an old schoolfriend; her overdraft and an endless procession of bills; Christmas shopping; and her husband’s lack of satisfaction with the quality of his breakfast. However, we hear very little of her personal responses to these facts: after recording a complex set of transactions between bank accounts and post-dated cheques in respect of bills, her only comment is “Financial instability very trying.”³¹⁶

Similar repressions of interior emotions or thought occur in conversations with others as the Provincial Lady negotiates the conventions of social interaction: “The Colonel sits next to me at lunch, and we talk about fishing, which I have never attempted, and look upon as cruelty to animals, but this, with undoubted hypocrisy and moral cowardice, I conceal.”³¹⁷ The Provincial Lady’s left-leaning politics (at one dinner party she finds “everyone except myself apparently holding Conservative views, and taking it for granted that none other exist in civilised circles”) and aversion to country pursuits appear initially to endow her with an individual, if unexpressed, set of opinions and politics;³¹⁸ however, this characterisation may also be a strategy to develop her as not only representative of provincial ladies in general, but of the liberal or left-leaning *Time and Tide* readers who constituted the original readers of the diary, supporting the view of the early Provincial Lady as a construction of a generic identity who can be clearly understood and recognised by her audience.

Delafield’s protagonist may occasionally use her diary as an outlet for her political opinions, but her inner emotional life is often firmly suppressed. Attracted by an unknown Frenchman on a bus while running a holiday errand, she records that she “[s]hould be very sorry indeed to recall in any detail peculiar fantasies that pass through my mind before Dinard is reached”.³¹⁹ After an emotionally disruptive reunion with a previous admirer at a dinner party, her diary entry states: “Experience extraordinarily medley of sensations as we drive away, and journey is accomplished practically in silence.”³²⁰ As with the relationship between Delafield’s own life and the content of her text, her limited exposition of the Provincial Lady’s inner feelings may be viewed as a strategic means of articulating a restrained feminist argument in her text. Greater detail about the Provincial Lady’s inner life might prevent reader identification with the protagonist, limiting their understanding of the points Delafield makes about the “disconcerting facts” affecting women’s

³¹⁵ ‘The Diary of a Provincial Lady’, p125

³¹⁶ *DPL*, p23

³¹⁷ *DPL*, p175

³¹⁸ *DPL*, p204

³¹⁹ *PLGF*, p85

³²⁰ *PLGF*, p205

lives in that period. The account must be “straightforward”, not complicated by details of emotions or opinions, in order to continue to appeal to the “average woman”.

Even the physicality of the Provincial Lady is established in generic terms. In the first two novels, Delafield avoids the detailed descriptions of dress which are commonplace in her other fiction and function as an important way of delineating characters. The Provincial Lady wears “my Blue, or my Black-and-gold”, with no further detail specified;³²¹ she is dismayed, as her readers might well have been, by changes in fashion:

Met by Rose, who has a new hat, and says that *no one* is wearing a brim, which discourages me - partly because I have nothing *but* brims, and partly because I know only too well that I shall look my worst without one.³²²

The most clearly defined outfit the Provincial Lady wears in the first volume of the diaries is a “blue flowered chintz frock [...] bought at Ste Agathe for sixty-three francs” while on holiday, but found to be “no longer becoming to me, as sunburn fades” and is banished “to furthest corner of the wardrobe”.³²³ This distinctive dress belongs only to the Provincial Lady’s holiday self, and may not disrupt her generic appearance once her holiday is at an end. Beyond identifying what does and does not suit her, we learn little of the Provincial Lady’s appearance or size and shape. Her recorded illnesses – recurrent colds and one instance of measles – are also fairly commonplace, although Delafield does make use of her protagonist’s eye infection, a complication of measles, as a source of humour. The Provincial Lady’s body is not an individual body, experiencing and narrating the pattern of an individual life, but a generic one that may be inhabited comfortably by her readers, supporting a reading of the character as generic in its earlier incarnations.

Delafield also defines her protagonist in relational terms. She is quickly established as a wife and mother; she is involved with the Women’s Institute and serves on local committees; she is persuaded to recite at village concerts. However, the Provincial Lady herself often rejects relational representations of herself by others. She dreads being introduced as Our Agent’s Wife by Lady Boxe; she resents being described as a Perfect Wife and Mother. These minor challenges to a generic relational status can be identified as a means of articulating the average woman’s difficulty in achieving and maintaining the boundaries of selfhood, and lay the foundations for the further development of her protagonist’s individuality in later volumes.

This generic quality allows Delafield to negotiate the difficulties in construction of subjectivity mainly through her evasion of the depiction of interiority, with approaches to self-contemplation by her protagonist diverted into bathos:

Extraordinary and wholly undesirable tendency displays itself to sit upon window-seat and think about Myself – but am well aware that this kind of thing never a real success, and that it will be the part of wisdom to get up briskly instead and look for shoe-trees to insert in

³²¹ *DPL*, p16

³²² *DPL*, p111

³²³ *DPL*, p232

evening-shoes – which I accordingly do, and shortly afterwards find myself in bed and ready to go to sleep.³²⁴

The relationship between the Provincial Lady's writing *I* and narrated *I* is uncomplicated by issues of separation and then reconstitution; in the early volumes of the *Diary*, the generic identity is not an *I*, not a subject defined by individual characteristics. The stylistic brevity used as part of the diary form of the novels often minimises the use of this pronoun: "Drive from Waterloo to Victoria, take out passport in taxi in order to Have It Ready, then decide safer to put it back again in dressing-case, which I do".³²⁵ The namelessness of the character, which achieves the autobiographical ambiguity discussed above, also allows her to appear to the reader as generic rather than specific. Through constructing a protagonist who stimulates reader identification, and through her emphasis on the commonality of the Provincial Lady's experiences, Delafield enables a critique of the circumstances that enforce this commonality and repress women's individuality. The focus on the development of identity rather than subjectivity in the earlier Provincial Lady novels can be identified as a marker of their middlebrow status, an indicator of the lack of depth of meaning and authenticity associated with the middlebrow. However, this middlebrow characteristic does not necessarily inhibit Delafield's feminist message; because the generic identity stimulates intersubjective understanding of the protagonist by the reader, and can stand generally for all women of her class and situation, feminist meaning – for those readers who care to discern it – can be emphasised.

As noted above, in the later volumes of the Provincial Lady's diaries, the text moves closer to an autobiographical representation of events in Delafield's life. At the same time, the text begins to establish a more detailed representation of an individual character. As her exterior life becomes more complex and extensive, the Provincial Lady reveals more of her inner life in her diary; we begin to learn more about her individual tastes and preferences, although she remains anonymous and her appearance is as indistinct as ever. She becomes less self-effacing and less inclined to repress her own inclinations and desires. Her developing agency and selfhood must, however, continue to be read in the context of her domestic responsibilities, which continue to punctuate her diaries and require her time and attention.

In *The Provincial Lady in America*, Delafield's protagonist begins to make more use of her diary as an outlet for unexpressed emotions. The intention of this may be mimetic, since it is likely that the Provincial Lady would have fewer opportunities to discuss her feelings while physically separated from friends and family. Her position in America is a professional one which requires her to maintain an appropriate level of conduct; her diary starts to record emotions that are more strongly expressed. For example, this episode deals with the Provincial Lady's encounter with the boring and intrusive Katherine Ellen Blatt:

³²⁴ *PLGF*, pp290-291

³²⁵ *PLGF*, p215

Bed still unmade, which annoys me, especially as Miss B. scrutinises entire room through a pince-nez and asks, What made me come here, as this is a place entirely frequented by professional people? She herself could, if I wish it, arrange to have me transferred immediately to a women's club, where there is a lovely group of highly cultivated women, to which she is proud to say that she belongs. Can only hope that my face doesn't reflect acute horror that invades me at the idea of joining any group of women amongst whom is to be numbered Miss Blatt.

Incredibly tedious half-hour ensues.³²⁶

The Provincial Lady makes use, in this passage, of stronger language ("acute horror", "incredibly tedious") than she has previously used to describe her unhappiness with a situation; for example, in an earlier volume her anger at her friend Rose, who volunteers her as a speaker for a niece's Women's Institute in Hertfordshire when she is trying to write in London, is described only as a "sense of definite grievance".³²⁷ It would be incorrect to suggest that the Provincial Lady develops a new mode of plain-spoken discourse in America; she still resorts to ironic circumlocution to describe her emotional reactions in this book. Arriving in Washington on the night train, she finds the hotel she expects to stay in fully booked, and is referred elsewhere. Her fear that she is being sent away for some personal reason is expressed as follows:

Woodman-Park Hotel also turns out to be enormous, and reflection assails me that if I am also told here that Every room is full up, I shall definitely be justified in coming to the conclusion that there is something about my appearance which suggests undesirability.³²⁸

However ironic the mode of expression, her recording of this event develops the Provincial Lady as an individual character, who might conceivably possess qualities of undesirability. The experience, as with many of her experiences in America, is a specific one, arising from the specific and individual experience of being a writer undertaking a book tour. This specificity supports a reading of the Provincial Lady as an increasingly clearly defined individual character, developing from a generic figure into a discrete subject. As Faye Hammill has indicated, however, this development is limited: "The Provincial Lady's increased celebrity in the States actually reduces her autonomy. She is treated as the property of her publishers, and their representative, Pete, controls her movements."³²⁹ An increasingly detailed depiction of the Provincial Lady's interior subjectivity is not accompanied by an increase in autonomy or agency. Delafield's text moderates the possible threat to a conservative readership of any increase in female autonomy that might accompany an increased self-awareness by ensuring that this does not, in fact, take place.

The American diary records much more of the Provincial Lady's physical sensations; the rigours of travel often leave her "alarmingly stiff, very cold, and utterly exhausted"³³⁰ and a visit to a football game in Boston has a similar impact: "I am quite unable to feel my feet at all, and [...] all

³²⁶ *PLA*, pp72-73

³²⁷ *PLGF*, p145

³²⁸ *PLA*, p182

³²⁹ Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between The Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p190

³³⁰ *PLA*, p138

circulation in the rest of my body has apparently stopped altogether – probably frozen.”³³¹ At a book signing, her “modest request that I may be allowed to Wash My Hands” leads to detailed warnings from the shop staff regarding locking the door: “last year Pulitzer Prize-winner was locked in there for hours and couldn’t be got out, man had to be sent for, door eventually broken down.”³³² The anecdote is repeated to her several times, even after she has successfully negotiated the lavatory door; this event serves to remind us of the physicality of Delafield’s protagonist through its references to basic bodily needs. We are reminded by such events that the Provincial Lady is an embodied subject undergoing the experiences she describes to us in her diary; this increases the sense of her development as a character and an individualised subjectivity that is separate from that of her readers. This is achieved by a greater representation of the protagonist’s interiority in the Diary simultaneously with the development and recording of a more complex and demanding exterior life; this process continues during *The Provincial Lady in War-Time*.

In her war-time persona, the Provincial Lady demonstrates more fully developed confidence and authority, although any grandiose musings about her effectiveness are usually quickly punctured by a bathetic mistake on her part, as when Aunt Blanche arrives, in the middle of the night, at her Devon home:

Have agreeable sense of having dealt promptly and efficiently with war emergency – this leads to speculation as to which Ministerial Department will put me in charge of its workings, and idle vision of taking office as Cabinet Minister and Robert’s astonishment at appointment [...] On reaching dining-room, find that electric kettle has boiled over and has flooded the carpet. Abandon all idea of Ministerial appointment, and devote myself to swabbing up hot water.³³³

However, the Provincial Lady has no hesitation in offering her professional services to the Ministry of Information. Eventually, this confidence is borne out and she finds war-work suited to her experience and abilities. Delafield’s protagonist has developed a sense of confidence about her literary career that is far removed from the author of the “minute and unpretentious literary effort” of *The Provincial Lady Goes Further*. The diary expresses this confidence both through the recording of the Provincial Lady’s engagement with the authorities as she seeks war work, and through her reflections on the disorganisation of those authorities which prevents her particular skills and abilities being effectively used. Nevertheless, as with her experiences in America, her autonomy and agency are constrained; appropriate war-work can only be assigned by the relevant authorities. These civil servants are exclusively male, the female Commandant presiding over the rather domestic environment of the Adelphi. Delafield maintains a realism here that is suited to the middlebrow context of her text and also mitigates any anxiety on the part of a conservative reader that women will acquire too much autonomy through their involvement in war-work.

³³¹ *PLA*, p167

³³² *PLA*, p124

³³³ *PLWT*, pp17-19

The Provincial Lady's sense of authority is expressed in various relationships with women younger than her. Her daughter Vicky, now a self-possessed teenager, is not allowed to usurp her mother in matters of domestic management: "Dear Vicky in many ways a great comfort, and her position as House prefect at school much to her credit, but cannot agree to be treated as though already in advanced stage of senile decay."³³⁴ Her recordings of her dealings with the Commandant of the Adelphi ARP Station, an autocratic and brusque young woman, indicate an inward rebellion at the Commandant's authority ("remind myself vigorously that I am old enough to be Commandant's mother"),³³⁵ as well as external self-assertion: "am suddenly possessed by spirit of defiance and hear myself replying in superbly detached tones that I am not here to waste either her time or my own".³³⁶ A more benevolent version of this authority develops in her friendship with Serena, a young worker at the Adelphi; the Provincial Lady provides emotional support to Serena as well as dispensing unsolicited advice: "Commiserate with [Serena], and suggest that conditions under which she is serving the country are both very strenuous and extremely unhygienic and that she may shortly be expected to break down under them."³³⁷ The Provincial Lady's increasing willingness to exercise and express her personal authority, both inwardly in her diary, and outwardly to others, indicates a developing agency and an assertion of her separate individuality which allows her to comment explicitly on the lives of others. She also begins to demonstrate a greater awareness of when her real feelings are being masked by the requirements of polite discourse. Writing to Aunt Blanche about the annoying Pussy Winter-Gammon, who has abandoned the flat she shared with Blanche and made herself indispensable at the Adelphi, she writes that "Mrs W-G has dynamic personality and is inclined to have a devitalising effect on her surroundings" but then wonders whether "it wouldn't have been better to say in plain English that old Mrs W-G is more aggravating than ever".³³⁸

In both her American and war-time diaries, however, the Provincial Lady remains firmly connected to her domestic context. *The Provincial Lady in America* begins with a familiar representation of village social life and a visit to an agricultural fair. Letters from home are of tremendous importance to the Provincial Lady during her journey: "Tear open letters from Robert and the children, read them three times at least, become homesick and rather agitated, and then read them all over again."³³⁹ She often considers her family, usually incongruously, in relation to the modern, urban environment she experiences in America: "cannot possibly conceive of Robert reading *The Times* seated on oblong black-and-green divan with small glass-topped table projecting from the wall beside him."³⁴⁰ A rose-coloured carpet in a house she visits provokes the reflection

³³⁴ PLWT, p4

³³⁵ PLWT, p156

³³⁶ PLWT, p159

³³⁷ PLWT, p269

³³⁸ PLWT, p146

³³⁹ PLWT, p75

³⁴⁰ PLA, p89

“Evidently no children, or else they use a separate staircase.”³⁴¹ These comments on the exotic nature of America and its incompatibility with family life maintain the characterisation of the Provincial Lady as provincial and domestic. They also undercut the increasingly specific representation of a writer’s professional life, as well as providing opportunities for irony and humour; the representation of home is benign and affectionate and integrated into professional life. In *The Provincial Lady in War-time*, the protagonist is placed again at the start of the novel in her Devonshire home, but is quickly moved to a London flat and the environment of the Adelphi. She makes one visit home during the course of the novel; informed by Cook that Winnie the housemaid has gone home to help care for an ill relative, and despite reassurances from Robert that all is well, the Provincial Lady returns home to investigate matters for herself.³⁴² This can be read as an attempt on Delafield’s part to reconnect her protagonist with the domestic front, and with the rural experience of the early stages of World War II, since she goes home to help with the evacuees and attempts to learn to cook. It also reinforces the primacy of the domestic role for women.

In the latter two volumes of her Provincial Lady novels the protagonist’s tastes and opinions are more frequently and extensively expressed in her diaries. Delafield also gives her a professional role outside the home which is likely to differ from that of the reader, undermining the opportunities for reader identification which, as I have argued above, can be read as part of a feminist project. Developing a discrete subjectivity from a generic identity requires Delafield to negotiate issues of authenticity within the autobiographical form she uses in these novels. Through regular references to the Provincial Lady’s home and domestic life, Delafield maintains the character’s generic qualities to balance her developing individuality; this individuality is also expressed in the context of characters such as Pussy Winter-Gammon, whose long autobiographical anecdotes, always in her own favour, are represented in the diary as inauthentic through a re-narration heavily ironic in tone. Mrs Winter-Gammon represents a stereotype of perfect feminine self-sacrifice; the Provincial Lady cannot hope to achieve this but nor is she inclined to do so, recognising her own limitations. Individualised, she may lose some reader identification, but she may also become an achievable example of women’s contribution to professional life and to the war-effort. Articulating her protagonist’s subjectivity allows Delafield to develop the character as an exemplar of feminist action delineated by individual perceptions, opinions and self-expression.

Throughout the Provincial Lady texts, a complex, ambiguous presentation of the boundaries between fact and fiction and between the subject and the stereotype emerges. The overlap between Delafield’s own life and that of her family, as Delafield herself acknowledges, opens up the possibility that the texts can be read as autobiographical; the texts are positioned at the boundaries of fiction and autobiographical fact, and these boundaries are tested by various means. The use of the diary form challenges the Victorian model of a reflective, teleological autobiographic mode, but also creates a heightened mimetic effect, an effect which Delafield frequently undercuts for the

³⁴¹ *PLA*, p65

³⁴² *PLWT*, pp151-154

purposes of humour or satire. The position of Robert, the Provincial Lady's husband, as a biographical or fictional character, and the representation of the development of a woman's writing career which may or may not be an autobiographical representation of Delafield's own life, are both complicated by Delafield's use of satire and humour, which can disrupt and efface (auto)biographical meaning even when characters or events in the text seem to be particularly close to their biographical source. Delafield's account of a woman's professional development is marked by the reticence typical of the autobiographical woman, but also seeks to establish an intersubjective relationship with her readers: she develops intimacy with her readers through the diary form, through the commonality of her protagonist's situation and experiences, and through intertextual references to the periodical *Time and Tide* where the *Diary* first appeared. By the final volume, however, the reader's ability to identify with the Provincial Lady has been constrained by the specific and personal nature of her war-time experiences. Delafield's text shifts constantly between the autobiographical and the fictional; these movements allow her to express and articulate feminist meaning while this meaning is also effaced or compromised by a change in formal approach or the introduction of humour and bathos. The understanding of Delafield's feminist meaning will depend on the position and engagement of the reader, and her intersubjective approach to the construction of the *Diary* stimulates the reader's response to her narrative as a whole and to her political expression.

Delafield's ambiguity extends to her representation of subjectivity in these texts. The articulation of female subjectivity is compromised by the autobiographical form, which constitutes a divided subject rather than a sole authentic self; by the tendency of women to be constructed as relational rather than independent subjects; and by the difficulty for women to articulate a discrete subjectivity in a culture which defines them as a generic identity. While Delafield attempts to create the Provincial Lady both as a generic identity and as an individual subject, she does so in a linear way, the character developing the expression of her individual authentic self as the four volumes of diaries progress. Initially her protagonist exemplifies a generic identity, frequently constructed relationally, with a repressed interiority even in her diary, a diffuse physicality, and a persistent anonymity. The Provincial Lady remains nameless but gradually acquires a greater subjectivity, expressing a fuller range of emotions, shown as possessing a body which can feel, and beginning to articulate a greater sense of self-confidence and authority in her dealings with the world. However, this progression towards individual selfhood is repeatedly shown to be constrained by the culture in which the Provincial Lady operates, with her autonomy and agency invariably under the overall control of patriarchal authorities and structures. Delafield's ambiguity here is in the extent to which she allows her protagonist's subjectivity to be effective in the world around her, and her realism is evident in that she demonstrates the continual operation of patriarchal authority and the primacy of the domestic role for women. However, expressions of both generic identity and individual subjectivity allow Delafield to express feminist meaning; neither approach inhibits this. Rather, the realism of Delafield's depictions of patriarchal control allows her to maintain her mimetic approach

and in this way to make her narrative acceptable to a more conservative audience even while she expresses feminist ideas for the sympathetic reader. This use of ambiguity in terms of form, characterisation and content typifies Delafield's approach to the expression and concealment of feminist meaning throughout her fiction.

Chapter 2 “Discussion closes with ribald reference to *Well of Loneliness*”: lesbian representations

In this chapter I consider the representations of lesbian characters, both overt and implicit, in Delafield's writing and the effects of these representations on the feminist tone of her work. I focus on the lesbian characters featured in *Consequences* (1919), *Challenge to Clarissa* (1931) and *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* (1940). Sometimes these characters are exemplary or heroic; in other cases they are used for the purposes of humour and satire. Either type of characterisation makes it possible to read her novels both as subverting heteronormativity and as perpetuating conservative meaning. Through consideration of contemporary works of fiction with similar themes, and of contemporary commentary on issues of sexuality and subsequent history and criticism, I identify the feminist import of these characters, their contribution to the tension between radical and traditional meanings in the novels concerned, and the extent to which they reinforce or subvert boundaries between the categories of lesbian and heterosexual. I also evaluate lesbian representations within the middlebrow cultural context in which radical or disruptive meanings can be simultaneously articulated and obscured, with the reader able, in Nicola Humble's formulation, to both “know and not know” that such meanings are being expressed in the text; I argue that Delafield's representations of lesbian characters are achieved by various formal techniques that enhance ambiguity and maintain the pleasurable readability of her texts for a middlebrow audience while simultaneously expressing subversive ideas.

The interwar lesbian: social and literary constructions

During Delafield's writing career, public knowledge and discussion of sexualities, including lesbian sexuality, increased significantly through developments in sexology and psychology. Lesbianism in particular became more openly discussed, moving from a “shadowy” sexual identity at the turn of the century, written about only by male scientists, to a topic that could be discussed among women and written about by women, in texts ranging from fiction to books of advice and guidance.³⁴³ Delafield herself not only wrote about lesbians but was familiar with the prevailing discourse about lesbianism; in 1920 Stella Benson recorded in her diary that Delafield “talked to me about my own greater attraction for women than for men, although she said it was not inversion or abnormality on my part, as I had no share in it”.³⁴⁴ Delafield articulates here an understanding of the sexological construction of lesbianism and a willingness to discuss the issue in conversation with her peers.

³⁴³ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1990 (2nd edition)), p87

³⁴⁴ Catherine Clay, *British Women Writers 1914-1945: Professional Work and Friendship* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p108

Delafield and Benson's conversation took place in a context in which, as Martha Vicinus has argued, lesbianism was becoming more visible:

What had previously been recognised, but left undefined, was now a known figure in sophisticated circles in London and Paris. In the 1920s the woman-loving woman of past centuries, stereotyped as an asexual spinster, or an oversexed vampire, or a masculine invert, stepped forward in all her complexity.³⁴⁵

This was not, however, a teleological journey in which a previously taboo subject became neutrally exoteric and therefore acceptable. The development of ideas of lesbianism took place in a social context that preserved, as Sally Alexander describes, “a silence about sex” in general and was unable in particular “to articulate in a language of legitimacy, compassion or pleasure – without prurience – women’s bodily or sexual needs or wants”.³⁴⁶ Public knowledge of the fact of lesbianism was developed and maintained by negative and critical means: libel cases, parliamentary debate about the criminalisation of lesbianism, and – most significantly of all – the obscenity case against *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. Social anxieties about lesbianism, arising from concerns about feminism and suffrage, the education of girls, the entry of women into previously male-dominated workplaces during World War I, and the perceived number of ‘surplus women’ in the 1920s, helped lesbianism emerge as a matter for debate, although the terms and language of this debate were often vague, confused or deliberately obscure.

Libel cases, such as that brought by the dancer Maud Allen against the MP Pemberton Billing in 1918 following his suggestion that she was involved in “that nameless vice between women” marked, as Laura Doan suggests, “the beginning of an important shift in the visibility of lesbianism [...] public interest in the subject of lesbianism intensified, even though references in the press to same-sex relations between women were for the most part oblique”.³⁴⁷ Doan considers that the lack of a “common cultural understanding or legal definition of lesbianism” at this time caused such cases to founder: accusations of lesbianism could not be sustained with comprehensible evidence or by the language available to the law.³⁴⁸ Similarly, the 1920 and 1921 parliamentary debates of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, during which the potential criminalisation of sexual relations between women was discussed, were hampered by a lack of understanding of the topic: “no one was positive about what anyone else meant by ‘it’”.³⁴⁹ The fear of greater visibility and intelligibility of lesbianism eventually frustrated the Bill’s progress; it was rejected on the grounds that lesbianism ought not to be openly prohibited, even though contributors to the House of Commons debate asserted that lesbian acts were “common

³⁴⁵ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p172

³⁴⁶ Sally Alexander, ‘The Mysteries and Secrets of Women’s Bodies: Sexual Knowledge in the First Half of the Twentieth Century’, in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* ed. by Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea (London: Routledge 1996), pp161-175 (p163)

³⁴⁷ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp31-32

³⁴⁸ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p32

³⁴⁹ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p54

knowledge”.³⁵⁰ By the time of *The Well of Loneliness* trial, “the subject of ‘Sapphism’ had been gradually disseminating into public consciousness as part of a larger process of public change brought about by the war”.³⁵¹ After the denunciation of Hall’s novel in the mass-market *Sunday Express* and the subsequent sensational reporting of the obscenity trial,³⁵² “Rebecca West could flatly state, ‘there are but few children old enough to read who are not in full possession of the essential facts regarding homosexuality’”.³⁵³ As Doan argues, the greater dissemination of these “facts” coincides with the initial development of notions of lesbian identity, and a visible lesbian mode of dress, itself established by Radclyffe Hall and other well-known 1920s lesbians.³⁵⁴ This transition from a vague, allusive representation of lesbianism to “full possession of the essential facts” can be traced in middlebrow depictions of lesbian characters during the 1920s and 1930s.

Part of the basis for an emerging lesbian visibility and identity derived from the work of psychologists and sexologists. Early sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing considered homosexuality to be an innate quality rather than an acquired one.³⁵⁵ Edward Carpenter developed further the theory of the ‘intermediate sex’; the moral and legal context meant that his writings about the physical expression of homosexuality were usually indirect, although as Jeffrey Weeks argues, “for those who wished to see, the message of his work was clear enough”.³⁵⁶ Henry Havelock Ellis also characterised sexual inversion as “based on congenital conditions”,³⁵⁷ considering that “acquired” inversion had in fact a congenital basis and that the acquisition may be stimulated by external factors including experience of same-sex education, seduction by an older person, and disappointment in “normal” love.³⁵⁸ Ellis also identified women-only professions and establishments as likely to “foster” lesbian activity, reinforcing the link between the aims of feminism and lesbian behaviour.³⁵⁹ Perhaps Ellis’s most enduring contribution to the construction of lesbian identity is his assertion that the “actively inverted woman” always has “a more or less distinct trace of masculinity”;³⁶⁰ this could be limited to a “cool, direct manner”, “masculine straightforwardness and sense of honour” or even a style of feminine dress that shows “traits of masculine simplicity” rather than an actually masculine physical appearance.³⁶¹ Ellis’s construction of lesbian masculinity, of the potential for lesbian ‘conversions’ of genetically susceptible women, and his identification of education and work as locations where such ‘conversions’ might take place, would prove particularly influential on middlebrow representations.

³⁵⁰ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p56

³⁵¹ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p24

³⁵² Diana Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p176

³⁵³ Vicinus, pp203-204

³⁵⁴ *Fashioning Sapphism*, p194

³⁵⁵ Laura Doan and Chris Waters, ‘Introduction. to ‘Part II Homosexualities’ in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp41-45 (p42)

³⁵⁶ Weeks, *Coming Out*, p81

³⁵⁷ Henry Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (London: Wilson and Macmillan, 1897), p129, p134

³⁵⁸ Ellis, p140

³⁵⁹ Ellis, p83

³⁶⁰ Ellis, p87

³⁶¹ Ellis, pp88-96

Stella Browne, one of the few women and feminists writing on sexual matters in the early twentieth century, asserted women's enjoyment of an active sexuality.³⁶² While Browne could put forward a positive view of lesbianism, writing that "[w]e are learning to recognise congenital inversion as a vital and very often valuable factor in civilisation, subject of course to the same restraints as to public order and propriety, freedom of consent, and the protection of the immature, as normal heterosexual desire",³⁶³ she also considered, as Doan and Waters note, that

Sexual inversion [was] in part the result of society's repression of the 'normal erotic impulse' and believed that if society were to adopt a less prudish attitude towards sex in general, and if women's right to sexual pleasure were to be affirmed, then inversion might diminish [...] like Ellis, Browne embraced the division of female sexual inverts into two groups: the 'pseudo' and the true or congenital invert. The former was seen as vulnerable to the sexual and corrupting advances of the latter, a belief that would culminate in the myth of the predatory lesbian.³⁶⁴

Browne continued to write about lesbianism throughout her career, and, as Lesley A. Hall reports, to maintain a radical belief that lesbian relationships were as valuable as heterosexual marriage, hypothesising

'a type of articulate, vigorous and adventurous woman who is inherently bisexual' [...] In 1935 Browne placed love for a woman alongside love for a man or commitment to a career as something many women might understandably find more compelling than maternity.³⁶⁵

Browne's writings about lesbianism form a pattern which other feminist writers on lesbianism would adopt; having established that the lesbian corrupter of the young or innocent was dangerous, she was free to suggest that there were positive aspects to lesbian relationships for consenting adult women.

The influence of Freud's developmental model of lesbianism, in which the lesbian had failed to "transfer her early libidinal attachment from her mother [...] to her father" and consequently remained at an "earlier, 'immature' phase of development", is evident in interwar texts dealing with lesbian sexuality.³⁶⁶ Although, Freud's works, like those of the sexologists, were generally inaccessible for the lay reader, key Freudian concepts were popularised by the press, and by books about psychoanalysis written for the general public.³⁶⁷ By the 1920s an "eclectic, diluted interpretation of Freudianism" had become popular with lay readers and writers.³⁶⁸ The influence of scientific writing on sexuality has been debated at length, particularly its influence on the construction of gay and lesbian identity. The circulation of sexological texts was limited to intellectuals and members of the medical and legal professions, and therefore their direct influence

³⁶² Stella Browne, 'Sexual Variety and Variability among Women and their Bearing upon Social Reconstruction' in papers of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, Publication No 3 1917, p4

³⁶³ Browne, p10

³⁶⁴ Doan and Waters, 'Introduction' in *Sexology Uncensored* ed. by Bland and Doan, p43

³⁶⁵ Lesley A. Hall, 'Feminist Reconfigurations of Heterosexuality in the 1920s' in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp135-149 (pp144-145)

³⁶⁶ Weeks, *Coming Out*, p94

³⁶⁷ Dean Rapp, 'The Early Discovery of Freud by the British General Public' *Social History of Medicine* iii (1990), 217-43 (pp218-220)

³⁶⁸ Rapp, p218

on the reading public was probably limited, although reference to them could be an indicator of sophisticated sexual knowledge for the middlebrow writer. Laura, in Delafield's *The Way Things Are*, has "studied a little psychology [and] obtained a loan of a volume of Havelock Ellis"; Laura's greater awareness of sexology and psychology is compatible with her characterisation as a published writer and frustrated wife and mother.³⁶⁹ The ordinary woman reader had greater access to books on sex and sexuality that were formulated as self-help books for the general public. These texts reiterated and popularised the ideas of sexological and psychological writings in their consideration of lesbianism.

The most widely read, and widely accessible, writer on sexual matters in the early part of the 20th century was Marie Stopes. Stopes wrote little and negatively about lesbianism; she describes lesbian relations as ranging from the "hysterically affectionate", through asexual love to a "mutual attachment lasting faithfully for many years" and suggested that lesbian "perverts" are "not so rare as normal wholesome people would like to believe",³⁷⁰ warning that the "corruption" of lesbian behaviour "spreads as an underground fire spreads in the peaty soil of a dry moorland".³⁷¹ Among Stopes's contemporaries, Arabella Kenealy associated gender indeterminacy with mental deficiency, and considered that "unfortunate, imperfect neuter-persons" were created by exposing women to the "exactions which are the normal of the male" [sic] in a text which makes a direct association between the effects of feminist campaigning and the ascendancy of lesbianism.³⁷² Geraldine Coster, in a book entitled *Psychoanalysis for Normal People* (1926), blended Freud and Ellis, identifying arrested psychosexual development and the greater opportunities for education available to women as productive of lesbianism.³⁷³ Maude Royden, a feminist, pacifist, and suffrage campaigner,³⁷⁴ echoed Carpenter in writing more positively about same-sex love and suggested that the lesbian "temperament" and its associated "disharmony" could be "transcended" to produce, perhaps, the "noblest" nature, although she was also careful to reiterate the dangers of lesbian predation.³⁷⁵ Janet Chance, writing in 1931 in the wake of the *Well of Loneliness* scandal, held a generally positive attitude to the importance of sex for women in the tradition of Browne and Stopes; however, she did not extend this to lesbians, stating that "[h]omosexual practices introduce into life abnormalities which upset and injure normal people".³⁷⁶ Stopes and her successors continued to emphasise the connection between feminism and lesbianism by associating lesbian behaviour with education and work for girls and women, and supported the construction of lesbianism as a tragic affliction leading to personal martyrdom but also greater opportunities for personal redemption, a construction which would find the fullest literary expression in *The Well of*

³⁶⁹ E.M. Delafield, *The Way Things Are* (London: Virago, 1988 (1927), p8

³⁷⁰ Marie Stopes, *Sex and the Young* (London: The Gill Publishing Co., 1926), p53

³⁷¹ Marie Stopes, *Enduring Passion* (London: Putnam, 1928), p133

³⁷² Arabella Kenealy, *Feminism and Sex-extinction* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920), p27

³⁷³ Geraldine Coster, *Psychoanalysis for Normal People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp183-184

³⁷⁴ Lesley A. Hall, *Outspoken Women: British Women Writing about Sex* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p320

³⁷⁵ Maude Royden, *Sex and Common-sense* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1922), p135

³⁷⁶ Janet Chance, *The Cost of English Morals* (London: Noel Douglas, 1931), p87

Loneliness. It is notable that these women writers were able to write relatively explicitly about lesbianism; in the context of non-fiction, the obscurity which characterised public discussion of lesbianism in the early 1920s was beginning to disperse.

By 1935, Laura Hutton was able to take a relatively positive view of lesbian relationships. Hutton justified the extensive discussion of lesbianism in her text by asserting that it is “a topic of frequent discussion in certain sections of society. At the present time references to it in novels and plays are indeed constantly made”, suggesting that literary representations were a key factor in developing the visibility of lesbians.³⁷⁷ She reiterated the link between the effects of feminism, particularly women’s greater economic independence, and the prevalence of lesbianism.³⁷⁸ Hutton sustains the notion that lesbians will necessarily have male physical or psychological characteristics, including ‘positive’ characteristics such as courage, intelligence or initiative.³⁷⁹ Notably, Hutton included within her definition of lesbianism those women in asexual but committed same-sex domestic relationships: these “are none the less essentially homosexual friendships, in the sense that they are the result of a primary impulse on the part of the one partner to find a life-companion of her own sex”.³⁸⁰ This assertion contributes to the ambiguity of such relationships in their social and literary context. Having dealt with the issue of the predatory lesbian at some length, Hutton was able to suggest that consensual sexual relationships between mature women were likely to be “useful and constructive, to the solving of the problem of the unmarried woman’s frustrated biological fulfilment”, acknowledging the radicalism of this argument, but insisting that a positive social view of such relationships was desirable.³⁸¹

Both popular and scientific writings on sexuality influenced literary representations of lesbians. Writers and artists, particularly those who were themselves lesbian or homosexual, sought sexological texts and used them to inform their work, although they also “tended to pick and choose the information that suited their needs”.³⁸² Middlebrow novelists could indicate a character’s interest in or concern about sexual matters by a passing reference to Marie Stopes: Delafield’s Laura, frustrated by her unfulfilling marriage, keeps “a small volume of Dr. Marie Stopes [...] beneath a pile of her more intimate underwear at the back of her chest of drawers”.³⁸³ In the conservative context of middlebrow writing, representations of lesbians tend to the implicit and allusive, but also draw on more explicit contemporary writings in order to reinforce the currency of their content and ideas. However, these allusive representations build on a tradition in which lesbian meaning was almost effaced from literature.

Terry Castle has established the notion of the “apparitional lesbian”, arguing that the lesbian has been made to seem invisible, or “ghosted”, by culture itself, because of the threat she

³⁷⁷ Laura Hutton, *The Single Woman and her Emotional Problems* (London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1935), p105

³⁷⁸ Hutton, p131

³⁷⁹ Hutton, pp108-111

³⁸⁰ Hutton, pp113-114

³⁸¹ Hutton, pp103-104

³⁸² Vicinus, p176

³⁸³ Delafield, *The Way Things Are*, p99

poses to patriarchal Western culture.³⁸⁴ In literature, this “ghosting” can take the form of “actual spectral metaphors” in which lesbians are described as or compared to ghosts who can then be exorcised.³⁸⁵ Until the early twentieth century, “lesbianism manifests itself in the Western literary imagination primarily as an absence, as chimera or amor impossibilia – a kind of love that, by definition, cannot exist. Even when ‘there’ [...] it is ‘not there’ [...] it is reduced to a ghost effect: to ambiguity and taboo”.³⁸⁶ Emma Donoghue has discussed the ways in which women were required to know and not to know about lesbianism. Referring to Diderot’s *The Nun* (1796), in which a Mother Superior attempts to seduce Susan, a young novice, Donoghue argues that:

the Mother Superior does not want simply to tell Susan about lesbian desire; she wants Susan to work it out from her own feelings. To reveal the knowledge to her would not be safe unless they were both implicated, and both had something to lose. But instead of matching her friend’s hints, Susan backs off and denies all knowledge.³⁸⁷

Donoghue shows how, historically, women had to make an active choice to know about lesbianism and to articulate this knowledge; Castle shows that such acts of articulation are frequently achieved only through a language of vagueness and obscurity, such as the language that confused the establishment debates about lesbianism discussed above. D.A. Miller argues that connotation, in a homophobic society, becomes a key means through which homosexuality can be both articulated and repressed. Connotation “enjoys, or suffers from, an abiding deniability”; hints and suggestions can easily be wilfully ignored or simply rebutted.³⁸⁸ Homosexuality expressed through connotation is “held definitionally in suspense on no less a question than that of its own existence”.³⁸⁹ However, even an ambiguous, connoted homosexuality helps to reinforce the legibility of the homosexual, as “the connotation instigates a project of confirmation” once the reader or listener has got the hint, it cannot be lost again, and the notion of the homosexual comes more clearly into view.³⁹⁰

Frankness about sex had to be carefully negotiated in middlebrow fiction, which worked “to develop an original language for the articulation of the sexual for a ‘respectable’ female reader”.³⁹¹ As Vicinus has argued, while the advent of sexology gave lesbians a language with which to articulate their desires, actually naming their sexual identity remained a “frightening responsibility”.³⁹² Respectable interwar female readers would resort to “empty speech” to discuss sexual matters, ensuring that meaning was conveyed without any explicit reference;³⁹³ middlebrow

³⁸⁴ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp4-5

³⁸⁵ Castle, p6

³⁸⁶ Castle, pp30-31

³⁸⁷ Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801* (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), p192

³⁸⁸ D.A. Miller, ‘Anal Rope’ in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* ed. by Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), pp119-141 (p124)

³⁸⁹ Miller, p125

³⁹⁰ Miller, p125

³⁹¹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p231

³⁹² Vicinus, p237

³⁹³ Alexander, ‘The Mysteries and Secrets of Women’s Bodies’, p166

texts needed to adapt this empty speech to articulate sexual matters in a context that made candour impossible, preserving the readerly pleasure of the accessible middlebrow while incorporating challenging content. Stopes and her peers were writing explicitly about lesbianism in a way that writers of middlebrow fiction were unable to emulate, continuing instead to rely on allusion and inference to express lesbian meaning. For middlebrow texts that attempt to create feminist meaning, overt naming of lesbian desires may be a further “frightening responsibility”.³⁹⁴ However, a literary category that understands but continues to refuse explicit representation of sexuality and its manifestations may be the ideal place to construct and explore notions of lesbianism and its importance for interwar society, and to explore and confirm through connotation ideas of lesbian identity and sexuality.

Considering Rosamond Lehmann’s *Dusty Answer* (1927), Humble suggests that middlebrow fiction “succeeds spectacularly in combining a revolutionary daring in the representation of sexuality with nimble sidesteps of any area that might attract the censor’s attention” through use of a subtext that the knowing reader may understand, allowing the ‘innocent’ reader to ignore it.³⁹⁵ The reader is “able to simultaneously know and not know what the novel is telling her”.³⁹⁶ By the 1930s, however, Humble detects a general increasing conservatism in middlebrow fiction and a decline in the sexual radicalism of middlebrow novels even while they maintained a connection with the sexual avant-garde.³⁹⁷ During this period political and psychological developments focused on “an attempt to establish and enforce a notion of ‘normal femininity’”;³⁹⁸ the number of novels dealing with lesbian topics also fell considerably, probably due to this increased conservatism and fears of censorship following the successful prosecution for obscenity and consequent withdrawal from sale of Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* in 1928.³⁹⁹

Catherine Stimpson has argued that the lesbian writer learned that “being quiet, in literature and life, would enable her to ‘pass’”. Silence could be a passport into the territory of the dominant world”, protecting the writer from punishment and ostracism.⁴⁰⁰ It is fear of the consequences of “plain speech” which led writers to use codes to express their meaning; these may be simply allegorical or more complex, both denying and revealing lesbian meaning.⁴⁰¹ Middlebrow novels, because of their commitment to realist and accessible prose, normally use silence, hints and connotation to express lesbian meaning, a conventional approach that could serve

both a homosexual and a heterosexual audience. The lesbian, as she struggles against the hostilities of the larger world, can find comfort in the ease of reading. Between text and self she may also establish a sense of community. The heterosexual, as she or he nears

³⁹⁴ Alexander, ‘The Mysteries and Secrets of Women’s Bodies’, p163

³⁹⁵ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p232

³⁹⁶ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p232

³⁹⁷ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp238-241

³⁹⁸ Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women’s Fiction, 1914-1939* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p26

³⁹⁹ Jeannette H. Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (Tallahassee: Naiad Press, 1985 (1956)) p288

⁴⁰⁰ Catherine R. Stimpson, ‘Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English’ in *Writing and Sexual Difference* ed. by Elizabeth Abel, (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp243-259 (p246)

⁴⁰¹ Stimpson, p246

unfamiliar and despised material, can find safety in the same ease of reading. *The continued strength of literary form can stand for the continued strength of the larger community's norms.*⁴⁰² [my italics]

The middlebrow, with its commitment to traditional literary form that would not challenge the reader, could enable provocative meaning to be established in a formal context that would not alienate readers belonging to the heterosexual majority. Middlebrow textual allusions to lesbians also referred, sometimes obliquely, to the notions of lesbian identity that originated in scientific writing and were perpetuated by the press, popular works on sexuality, and other literary works. These intertextual references could, for the reader who chose to recognise them, construct lesbian characters in stories that could not overtly refer to sexuality.

Ellis's model of the masculine female invert "facilitated the entry of the lesbian into the visual field, by establishing a set of characteristics that could presumably be interpreted/read" and that could be used by middlebrow writers to indicate lesbian meaning.⁴⁰³ Interwar writers could locate their texts historically in the 1880s and 1890s, or in contemporary society, and still make use of trends in fashion towards the masculine, and the accompanying social anxiety about these trends and the position of women. Joan, in Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924), grows up during the last decades of the nineteenth century and adopts short hair from the age of twelve;⁴⁰⁴ by her early twenties, the older, "unfeminine", and pointedly-named Beatrice Lesway's only comment on her mode of dress is "No good dotting the 'i's", my dear".⁴⁰⁵ In Winifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street*, published in the same year as *The Unlit Lamp*, Muriel Hammond will turn her back on the opportunity of marriage to the young squire in order to make a home with Delia Vaughan, a political campaigner. Delia is "masculine" in appearance, can blow "a squadron of smoke-rings", and greets Muriel, newly arrived in London, wearing "a coat buttoned over her blue striped pyjamas".⁴⁰⁶ In *The Hotel* (1927), Elizabeth Bowen characterises the androgynously-named Sydney, in love with Mrs Kerr, as *sportif* and boyish.⁴⁰⁷ However, before the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, middlebrow writers could also make use of the ambiguous status of masculine appearance to veil any explicit lesbian meaning. As Doan argues, masculine dress acquired complex meanings in 1920s British society; it had been associated with feminism and the New Woman from the late nineteenth century, and also had associations with upper-class eccentricity.⁴⁰⁸ But during the 1920s masculine dress became fashionable, a marker of modernity; Hall herself was described in the press as having an "aura [of] high-brow modernism".⁴⁰⁹ In the context of contemporary style,

⁴⁰² Stimpson, p257

⁴⁰³ Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994), p9

⁴⁰⁴ Radclyffe Hall, *The Unlit Lamp*, p11

⁴⁰⁵ Hall, *The Unlit Lamp*, p212

⁴⁰⁶ Winifred Holtby, *The Crowded Street* (London: Virago, 1981 (1924)), p47, p228, p240

⁴⁰⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Hotel* (London: Vintage, 2003 (1927)), pp13-15

⁴⁰⁸ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, pp100-101

⁴⁰⁹ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p112

Hall's dress is not obviously lesbian but simply fashionable.⁴¹⁰ However, to other lesbians, even at this time masculine dress could be a coded signal of the wearer's sexuality.⁴¹¹ In 1920s middlebrow texts, masculine appearance in women could indicate a number of possible meanings: the masculine woman might be lesbian, feminist, determinedly modern, intellectual and highbrow, a follower of fashion, or any combination of these characteristics.

Delafield makes use of this ambiguity in *What is Love?*; upper-class Victoria Carey wears tailored clothes, short hair and a monocle, and possesses a "strong, frank" handshake.⁴¹² She is still unmarried at the age of twenty-seven, and not attracted by the first two young men who propose to her.⁴¹³ There is a certain possessive ambiguity about her feelings for her cousin Ellie; Victoria warns her not to cut her hair and criticises her clothes.⁴¹⁴ Delafield, through these allusions, opens up a possible reading of Victoria as lesbian, but the narrative will confuse this reading when Victoria eventually marries Ellie's fiancé.⁴¹⁵ Delafield makes exemplary middlebrow use of potential indicators of lesbianism in Victoria's dress and behaviour to bring a titillating modern sophistication to her novel, but resolves the ambiguity of this characterisation by Victoria's marriage. *What is Love?* was published in 1928, shortly before *The Well of Loneliness* would change the perception of masculine women entirely. "In the massive publicity of the trial, for the public at large the meaning of female masculinity would narrow drastically as the subject of lesbianism exploded like a bombshell."⁴¹⁶ After 1928, masculine dress could no longer be a subtle hint of the possibility of lesbianism; it meant that the character was intended to be read as lesbian.

Education, like dress, is used by interwar fiction as an indicator of lesbianism. This marker of sexuality plays on the fears that same-sex education would inculcate sexuality in the young, and links directly with Ellis's suggestions that the education of women would be likely to lead to greater numbers of female sexual inverts. The predatory Clare Hartill and her love interest Alwynne Durand in Clemence Dane's *Regiment of Women* (1917) are both teachers; Joan in Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* is scholarly, and hopes to study medicine, while her lover Elizabeth has been to Cambridge and is originally Joan's governess.⁴¹⁷ In *Dusty Answer*, Judith Earle will fall in love with Jennifer while at Cambridge.⁴¹⁸ For Nancy, in Bryher's *Development*, school is the place where she will begin to realise that homosocial relationships with women are worthwhile.⁴¹⁹ The sexologists' notion that greater education of women might lead to greater numbers of lesbians, and prevailing social fears about predatory lesbian schoolmistresses, could be exploited by middlebrow writers to indicate lesbian meaning by giving their characters an enthusiasm for learning, or positioning them as

⁴¹⁰ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p112

⁴¹¹ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p120

⁴¹² E.M. Delafield, *What is Love?* (London: Macmillan, 1928), p198, p164

⁴¹³ Delafield, *What is Love?* pp234-235

⁴¹⁴ Delafield, *What is Love?* p61, p89

⁴¹⁵ Delafield, *What is Love?* p342

⁴¹⁶ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p124

⁴¹⁷ Hall, *The Unlit Lamp* p118, p11

⁴¹⁸ Rosamond Lehmann, *Dusty Answer* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 (1927)), p153

⁴¹⁹ W. Bryher, *Development: A Novel* (London: Constable, 1920), pp92-93

educators. As more texts made use of this allusion, middlebrow writers could also rely on the intertextual reference to cement their meaning; the fictional schoolmistress in a middlebrow novel has in her lineage the ultimate predator, Clare Hartill.

Middlebrow writing sought to engage with emerging issues of the day, of which lesbianism was one, but its connotative approach to lesbian visibility also continues the tradition of the apparitional lesbian, at least in middlebrow fiction published before *The Well of Loneliness*. It can be seen as oppositional to the way in which highbrow texts, such as those by Woolf and Bowen, represented lesbianism. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, Woolf creates two lesbian representations: the negative characterisation of the significantly-named governess Miss Kilman, and the depiction of the kiss between the young Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton. Miss Kilman is not only constructed as lesbian by her spinster status, her profession and her dowdy physical appearance, but also by Clarissa's dislike of her ("Heavy, ugly, commonplace, without kindness or grace"⁴²⁰) and by her own interior recognition of her love for Elizabeth Dalloway, "this youth, who was so beautiful this girl, whom she genuinely loved!"⁴²¹ Woolf uses indicators of lesbianism like the profession of teacher as any middlebrow text might, but offers a more explicit statement of lesbian affection in the interior monologue of the character herself. Clarissa is similarly explicit when she identifies the moment when "Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down!" as "the most exquisite moment of her whole life".⁴²² These candid expressions of lesbian desire and lesbian acts, albeit in the context of a novel which is not centrally concerned with lesbianism, contrast sharply with the connotative practice of middlebrow texts. They also work to support Woolf's ambitions as a self-identified highbrow writer of innovative fiction attempting to explore the "varying [...] unknown and uncircumscribed" nature of human life, including "the dark places of psychology".⁴²³ Woolf's explicit references to lesbianism were not imitated by her middlebrow peers, who – Delafield included – relied throughout the 1920s on the connotations and inferences enabled by use of the markers of lesbianism discussed above. However, in the late 1920s the boundaries of connotative representation were tested by a turn towards greater explicitness.

In Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927), the plot centres on the affection of Sydney, a medical student in her twenties, for Mrs Kerr, an older woman. Mrs Kerr encourages their intimacy at first, but after her son Ronald arrives at the Riviera hotel she first neglects Sydney and then rejects her. However, when Sydney agrees to marry Mr Milton, a visiting clergyman, Mrs Kerr's interference helps ensure that the engagement is broken off. Like her middlebrow peers, Bowen makes use of allusive textual constructions of lesbianism: the other guests at the hotel consider the

⁴²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Grafton Books, 1976 (1925)), p111

⁴²¹ *Mrs. Dalloway*, p117

⁴²² Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p33

⁴²³ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' in *The Common Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938 (1925)), pp145-153 (pp148-151)

friendship to be not “quite healthy” while Sydney is boyishly “eccentric”.⁴²⁴ Ronald, referring to Sydney as a “ghost” in his family, evokes notions of the apparitional lesbian.⁴²⁵ Manipulative Mrs Kerr has characteristics in common with the stereotypical predatory lesbian. While this construction of lesbian character has affinities with previous middlebrow representations, Bowen’s highbrow and modernist style facilitates a greater explicitness both in dialogue and in interior monologue. Sydney, criticising to Mrs Kerr the lack of value ascribed to relationships between women, opens up the possibility that such a relationship could have as much value as a heterosexual one: “I mean, you and I are supposed to assume, or to seem everywhere to assume, that that man down in the garden could be more to either of us than the other”.⁴²⁶ When Veronica, another young woman at the hotel, sympathises with Sydney over Mrs Kerr’s defection, Sydney is amazed that she can articulate this: “It seemed incredible that the words Veronica had just made use of should ever have been spoken”.⁴²⁷ The novel opens and closes on another homosocial couple, Miss Pym and Miss Fitzgerald, who have quarrelled at the start of the text, and are “reunited, in perfect security” at the novel’s end.⁴²⁸ The closing focus of the text on a quasi-lesbian relationship opens the possibility of such a relationship being a positive choice for women, with as much value as heterosexual marriage.

The Hotel was perhaps the last work to be able to make use of allusion and inference to construct implicit lesbian meaning. *The Well of Loneliness* and Compton Mackenzie’s *Extraordinary Women*, also published in 1928, would both make use of entirely explicit lesbian meanings and characters, although to very different ends. Mackenzie’s farce depends for its humour on the outrageous behaviour of a group of lesbians staying on Capri. His protagonist Rosalba seduces her female admirers with “accomplished kisses”⁴²⁹ and declares herself to be “abnormal”;⁴³⁰ her lover Rory (Aurora) Fremantle is “so masculine as almost to convey the uncomfortable impression that she really was a man dressed up in female attire”.⁴³¹ Their relationship is explicitly sexual, with Rory admiring the naked Rosalba’s “entrancing flesh”.⁴³² Rory also ascribes a superiority to same-sex love: “I regard myself as privileged to be constituted as I am. I regard myself as the evidence of progress, not as a freak. I maintain that in the future all love will be homosexual”.⁴³³ Mackenzie’s novel is not a plea for greater tolerance, however. His characters serve the comedy of his novel and are frequently ridiculous, outrageous and inauthentic, their antics merely serving to amuse a group of rich, underemployed women with no particular talents.

⁴²⁴ Bowen, p60

⁴²⁵ Bowen, p126

⁴²⁶ Bowen, p69

⁴²⁷ Bowen, p115

⁴²⁸ Bowen, p199

⁴²⁹ Compton Mackenzie, *Extraordinary Women* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986 (1928)), p119

⁴³⁰ Mackenzie, p122

⁴³¹ Mackenzie, p43

⁴³² Mackenzie, p141

⁴³³ Mackenzie, p167

The Well of Loneliness makes use of the language of sexology, using terms such as inversion and naming Krafft-Ebing among the authors whose works are kept in Stephen Gordon's father's locked bookcase.⁴³⁴ The descriptions of lesbian relationships are deliberately explicit: Stephen asserts her love for Angela Crossby when her mother seeks to deny its validity,⁴³⁵ there are careful delineations of the different types of lesbians to be found at Valérie Seymour's Paris salon,⁴³⁶ and the novel closes with its celebrated call for a "right to existence" for the inverted.⁴³⁷ Doan's analysis of the obscenity case against the *Well* notes that Hall's publisher Jonathan Cape "pitched the publicity, pricing and reviews not to Hall's usual middlebrow following but to a more highbrow readership – a strategy that was, initially anyway, successful".⁴³⁸ Hall's rejection of allusive middlebrow techniques for constructing lesbian meaning in favour of explicit statement and assertion, and her explicit political meaning, do challenge the categorisation of the text as middlebrow. However, if middlebrow writing can be most clearly defined by its readership, Hall's established reading public contributed to its successful prosecution for obscenity: "the furore aroused by [...] *The Well of Loneliness* was partly because the book reached a middlebrow audience".⁴³⁹ One effect of the obscenity case was to "establish a lesbian sub-culture in a Radclyffe Hall idiom",⁴⁴⁰ giving lesbians "an enhanced sense of identity".⁴⁴¹ But as Doan argues, the sub-culture also became visible to the general public: press coverage of the trial ensured that the notion of lesbianism was understood and associated strongly with Hall's lifestyle:

An explanatory model based on a dramatic 'before' and 'after' seems almost too seductive in its simplicity, but the simple – if, for some, lamentable – fact of the matter is that after the obscenity trial of *The Well* life changed utterly for *all* women who lived with other women, or *all* women drawn to masculine styles of dress, whether lesbian or not [...] the possibility of denial – so convenient for those who knew but preferred not to – began to slip away.⁴⁴²

The Well of Loneliness marks a watershed in the visibility and legibility of the lesbian. It also marks a watershed in the modes of representation of lesbianism. Middlebrow writers could no longer construct texts using "empty speech" which allowed readers to "know and not know" about the sexuality of their characters; literary evasions, allusions and inferences depended on "the possibility of denial", undermined by the *Well* and by its detractors. In the 1930s, middlebrow writers who wished to engage with the topic of lesbianism would need to develop new approaches, since the ghostly, allusive, deniable lesbian was no longer a literary possibility. Lesbian visibility also brought with it the possibility of using the lesbian as an object of humour, satire or fear. Delafield's own

⁴³⁴ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago, 1982 (1928)), p207

⁴³⁵ Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, p204

⁴³⁶ Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, pp352-356

⁴³⁷ Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, p447

⁴³⁸ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p8

⁴³⁹ Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day: Women Who Invented the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p80

⁴⁴⁰ Rowbotham, p80

⁴⁴¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society* (London: Longman, 1989 (2nd edition)), p221

⁴⁴² Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p193

lesbian characters reflect this transition from allusive to explicit, from tragic heroine to comic sideshow. Before 1928, like other middlebrow writers, she could create a connoted lesbian protagonist; after 1928 this would no longer be possible.

The allusive lesbian: *Consequences*

In this section I review Delafield's *Consequences* (1919) and consider the ways in which its protagonist Alex can be read as a lesbian character, both by the present-day and the interwar reader. This reading draws on the historical writings on lesbianism noted above to chart the literary means by which lesbianism has been represented, and the ways in which readers of interwar fiction were able to understand and recognise notions of lesbianism. I consider to what extent a reading of Alex as lesbian contributes to Delafield's construction of a feminist argument. *Consequences* presents a straightforward critique of the limited upbringing and options for upper-class young women in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, depicting a society that has no place for the woman who does not marry and has no means of earning her own living. Does Alex's lesbianism support Delafield's critique – since lesbians are especially affected by the requirement to marry – or obscure it, since Alex's particular problems with the status quo can be ascribed to her sexuality rather than to the constraints on young women of her class and era? This discussion takes account of the limited engagement with lesbianism in feminist theories of the time.

Consequences was Delafield's fourth published novel, and tells the story of Alexandra Clare, always known as Alex. Alex is the eldest child of Sir Francis and Lady Isabel Clare, a late-Victorian upper-class couple who live in Bayswater in London; Sir Francis is Catholic and the children are being raised, rather superficially, in that faith. At the start of the book, Alex initiates a game in which her sister Barbara falls and hurts her back; Alex's parents send her to a convent school in Belgium. At school she develops a passion for Queenie Torrance, who tolerates Alex's affection for her. Intimate friendships are discouraged at the convent; Alex is chastised for this in front of the whole school. After school Alex is launched into London society; she is pretty and well-dressed, but not very attractive to men, and when in her second season she becomes engaged to Noel Cardew her family is relieved. However, Alex quickly realises that she is not in love with Noel, nor he with her, and breaks off the engagement. Disenchanted with her society life, Alex becomes acquainted with Mother Gertrude, the superior of a convent near her house. Mother Gertrude suggests that Alex might find that the life of a nun would suit her. Increasingly unhappy at home, and with a growing love for Mother Gertrude, Alex leaves her family after a serious argument over her future, and goes to live at the convent.

The novel rejoins Alex eight years later, a professed nun still waiting for the emotional fulfilment that she has always longed for, and increasingly exhausted by the physically rigorous life. Mother Gertrude is now Assistant Superior, and Alex's love for her is undimmed; when she hears that Mother Gertrude is to be transferred to a new convent in South America, she breaks down and

determines to leave, eventually returning to London. Her parents are now dead, Barbara is an impoverished widow, and her brother Cedric is living in the family home with his wife Violet and their baby; he also provides a home to their younger adult siblings Archie and Pamela. Money difficulties come to the fore: Alex's father divided her inheritance between her sisters. Alex cannot support herself on the tiny income left to her, Barbara is unwilling to share her home with her, and Alex realises that Violet's kindness to her is due to her love for Cedric. Alex determines to find work and her own home, and arranges to rent a room in a cheap part of London. She stays on in Cedric's house while the family is away; when the convent sends her a bill for her expenses, she cashes a cheque left with her by Cedric for the servants' wages in order to pay this, before moving out. Cedric discovers the servants have not been paid, and returns to confront Alex, denouncing her behaviour as criminal. Alex becomes convinced that she must end her own life, and one evening she goes to Hampstead Heath, fills her pockets with stones, and walks into a deep pond.

Delafield's feminist purpose in *Consequences* is quite evident; the novel functions as a critique of the limited options available to girls and young women of Delafield's own class and social environment. Her portrayal of the rigid codes of behaviour that Alex endures as a young woman – not more than three dances with any one young man at a ball, no dining in restaurants, no social contact with anyone “not – altogether”⁴⁴³ – articulate an argument for greater freedom and opportunity for women. Delafield was writing at a time when social anxieties about women's roles were profound; her novel can be read as a counterpoint to anti-feminist comment on such matters as the extension of the vote to women, the tensions arising from the end of women's war-work and their return to domestic roles, and the fears about the social effects of ‘surplus women’.⁴⁴⁴ Alex is, as Nicola Beaman indicates, “not the marrying type”,⁴⁴⁵ and Delafield's novel criticises societies that see marriage as the only possible option for women, and give them no opportunities or resources to pursue any other kind of life. Beaman's use of this euphemism is telling: Delafield also sets up a subtle but nonetheless insistent construction of Alex as lesbian through a characterisation that draws on sexological models of lesbianism. The primary means of this is Delafield's overt characterisation of Alex as *other*: she is constantly defined as separate, different, at odds with her social environment. This construction helps add drama to Delafield's critique of the effect of late Victorian social standards on those unfit for the marriage market, but I argue that Delafield goes further; her particular and reiterated description of Alex as other and separate refers to contemporary ideas of the nature of the lesbian, and helps establish a reading of Alex as lesbian.

Alex is portrayed as having a marked sense of separateness and specialness as a child, which is negatively reinforced when she is “sent from home in disgrace” by her parents after

⁴⁴³ E.M. Delafield, *Consequences* (London: Persephone Books, 2000 (1919)), p103, p113, p110. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

⁴⁴⁴ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1999* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000 (2nd edition)), pp74-77

⁴⁴⁵ Nicola Beaman, ‘Preface’ in *Consequences* by E.M. Delafield (London: Persephone Books, 2000 (1919)), ppvii-xvi (pxvi)

Barbara's accident (21). The atmosphere of her convent school reinforces Alex's sense of her otherness as something wrong and sinful, making her believe that "there was no fault to which she could not lay claim" (31). The scandal that arises from Alex's particular affection for Queenie Torrance links, both dramatically and psychologically, her love for Queenie and her sense of sinful separateness:

Alex [...] felt as though she had never before realised the depth of her own perversion [...] She saw herself eternally different from her companions, eternally destined to lose her way, wickedly and shamefully, without volition of her own she knew, amongst those standards to which the right-thinking conformed. (37-39)

Through this dramatic realisation of a traumatic event, Delafield reinforces the notion that Alex's difference is innate and essential, and that it will dictate the future tragic events of her life. Alex responds to this sense of sinful difference by attempting to hide her feelings: "No one must know, or she would certainly be blamed and ridiculed for her foolish and headlong fancy" (50). In sexological terms, Alex can be read as a congenital invert, her feelings about Queenie apparently innate. On her return from the convent after the shame of public denunciation, her back is "bent like a bow" and she looks "half-starved" (52). Delafield's reiteration of Alex's *bodily* inability to conform to social and moral expectations insists on the innate quality of her separateness from her family and her peers. While Alex, finally released from school, is initially excited about her social debut, her experience of the London 'season' only serves to underline her separateness and lack of affinity with others (120). Her flight to the convent after rejection by her family at a point of emotional crisis, and in a historical context where a woman of her class had no social position outside the family, indicates the foundation her feelings have in reality. Her father's distaste for her emotionalism, and Barbara's eagerness to ensure that Alex does leave home, suggest to the reader that Alex's sense of otherness, while martyred and overwrought, is not misplaced (254-259). Alex's outsider status also has affinity with the notion of the lesbian as a spectral presence in heterosexual society and the literary representation of lesbians as apparitional.

Alex's lapse into mild criminality through her "embezzlement" of the servants' wages, serves to reinforce her moral separateness. Depicting Alex's failings as criminal and as inherently shameful moves Delafield's characterisation a significant distance from that of a socially awkward young woman. Criminality and lesbianism had not only been associated by Ellis but also frequently coupled together in other representations: "the congenital invert and the born female offender marked the limits of cultural femininity. And they did so as a couple."⁴⁴⁶ Contemporary reviews questioned the realism of the embezzlement,⁴⁴⁷ although Delafield is careful to establish Alex's total naivety about money matters (387). Cedric's angry reaction, and suggestion that Alex has committed "a prosecutable offence", seem melodramatic and unrealistic to the modern reader (398). However, they reinforce the notion of Alex as an abject figure, criminally separate from

⁴⁴⁶ Hart, p13

⁴⁴⁷ E.E. Mavrogardato, 'New Novels' *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 June 1919, p311

mainstream society and essentially other. Cedric's anger with Alex echoes Sir Francis's rejection at the end of Book I, and both rejections precipitate her flight into another world, thus serving a carefully constructed plot in which all of Alex's downfalls are played out twice. The development of the plot supports a reading of the text as middlebrow; it provides an example of the type of writing that Stimpson characterises as soothing to the heterosexual reader, because of its conventionality, while allowing the more aware reader to access lesbian meaning. In the essay 'Modern Fiction', Virginia Woolf identifies the rigours of plot as a "powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has [the writer] in thrall", and associates submission to this tyrant as a characteristic of "materialist" fiction.⁴⁴⁸ According to Woolf this category includes the work of Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells, writers now associated with the middlebrow; consequently adherence to plot can also be identified as a middlebrow characteristic. Delafield's middlebrow aesthetic context means that she cannot place her "emphasis on something [...] hitherto ignored" as Woolf suggests that modernist writers might do;⁴⁴⁹ Alex's character must be constructed in an essentially exterior manner through the voice of an omniscient narrator and the structural demands of the plot, rather than through a direct representation of Alex's interior subjectivity. The "something [...] hitherto ignored" is constructed around and in spite of the plot, emerging through allusion and connotation.

At the end of her life, Alex reflects in suicidal despair on her essential wrongness: "Alex did not question that the fault lay with herself. From her baby days, under the unvarnished plain speaking of old Nurse, she had known herself the black sheep of every flock." (404) Delafield would go on to write of other young women's struggles with the Edwardian marriage market in novels such as *Thank Heaven Fasting*, but none would have such a marked sense of otherness as Alex. The positioning of Alex as innately quasi-criminal, outside society and at odds with its institutions, goes further than simply establishing her as unsuitable for the marriage trade, and aligns her characterisation with prevailing notions of sexual inversion as defined by sexologists and replicated in other texts. This characterisation is then developed by the depiction of Alex's love for her own sex and her awkward interactions with heterosexuality.

When Alex meets Queenie Torrance, she has had a couple of short-lived crushes on other girls at school, but her feelings for Queenie are unexpectedly powerful: "she had found at last the ideal object on whom to expend [her] vehement powers of affection" (28). The sense of shame and secrecy that Alex feels suggests that her affection goes beyond the boundaries of a schoolgirl crush. This intimation is developed further by the text's emphasis on the sexual maturity of Queenie, who is "charged with a certain animal magnetism" and has been sent to the convent because she is "already attractive to men" (28). Queenie has many admirers at the school; this establishes a concept of normality for the idea of a schoolgirl crush, and allows Delafield to explore the ways in which Alex's love goes beyond the boundaries of such relationships (28). Delafield also explores another 'normal' form of convent relationship, the affection of a schoolgirl for one of the nuns:

⁴⁴⁸ Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', p148

⁴⁴⁹ Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', p151

Had the vagrant fancy of Alex lighted upon anyone of the elder nuns charged with the direction of the school, the attraction would have been discreetly permitted if not admittedly sanctioned, by the authorities. It would almost inevitably have led Alex to an awakening of religious sensibilities, and the desirability of this result would have outweighed, even if it did not absolutely obscure in the eyes of the nuns, the excessive danger of obtaining such a result by such means. (31-32)

Delafield's suggestion that lesbian attraction between a girl and an older nun would be not only tolerated but encouraged if it could engender spiritual development connects her text to contemporary anxieties about predatory lesbian teachers in same-sex schools and to texts like Dane's *Regiment of Women*, which Delafield read and admired.⁴⁵⁰ Here, the text is exploring and adopting prevailing negative views of lesbianism in order to reinforce its argument for more freedom for young women; a hierarchical lesbian relationship between a nun and a school may be tolerable, while a relationship between peers is not. Relationships, even lesbian ones, are tolerated by a controlling society if they foster the aims of this society; peer relationships that may challenge authority are to be suppressed. Delafield's text exposes the hypocrisy of authorities that will use the "excessive danger" of lesbian predation to achieve socially desirable ends, while constraining the social and emotional lives of their young charges. However, the suggestion that lesbian affection can be so exploited dissociates lesbianism from feminist notions of women's liberation and attaches it to ideas of patriarchal control. Furthermore, Delafield's account of Alex's passion for Queenie can be read as supportive of the limitations placed on young women: if girls are allowed to choose their own friends, they may well choose badly. Through her suggestion of lesbian predation, and her representation of Alex's ill-chosen love objects, Delafield keeps hostile ideas about lesbianism visible in the text, and distances the text from more radical views of sexuality.

The adult Queenie, a social and sexual success, provides emphatic contrast to Alex's uneasy engagement with heterosexual norms. Alex becomes friendly with one of Queenie's admirers, Maurice Goldstein, who confides in Alex about his unsuccessful pursuit of her friend (116). This draws Alex into the type of triangular relationship which, as Catherine Clay argues, both exposes and conceals notions of desire between women through the introduction of the male component of the triangle.⁴⁵¹ Alex has a legitimate outlet for her own feelings about Queenie since she can endorse and support Goldstein's passion for her. The scene in which Alex and Goldstein watch Queenie, engrossed in the company of another admirer, smoke a cigarette, suggests both sexual and gender transgression; Queenie's mildly transgressive act acquires a disruptive sexual power when witnessed by two people who desire her (117-118). This drama encourages Alex to reflect on her own heterosexual potential: "What man would speak and think of her as Maurice Goldstein spoke and thought of Queenie Torrance? [...] No man of flesh and blood held any place in the slender fabric of her fancies" (119-120). Alex characterises her own experience of love, love of Queenie, as

⁴⁵⁰ E.M. Delafield, 'E.M. Delafield' in *Beginnings* ed. by L.A.G. Strong (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1935), p75

⁴⁵¹ Clay, p151

“wrong” and “different” (120); in the context of the triangular encounter with Goldstein, this characterisation contributes to a reading of Alex as lesbian and marginally aware of her own sexuality. By making Alex call herself and her emotions “perverted”, Delafield connects her protagonist to the terminology of sexual inversion that was emerging from contemporary sexological writing, and reinforces the idea of Alex’s lesbian sexuality.

Delafield also uses Alex’s discomfort with heterosexual sexual expression to establish a sense of her sexual difference. As a schoolgirl, she is “disgusted and indignant” when, during a family visit, eleven-year-old Cedric kisses the twelve-year-old Marie Monroe (82-84). By the time of her engagement to Noel Cardew, Alex is disillusioned, unhappy with her lack of social success and her parents are disappointed with her:

Morbidity was a word which had no place in the vocabulary of her surroundings, but Lady Isabel said to her rather plaintively, ‘You must try and look more cheerful, Alex, dear, when I take you about. Your father is quite vexed when he sees such a gloomy face’. (130)

“Morbidity” was a key word for the sexologists, used by Ellis and Browne in their definitions of sexual inversion.⁴⁵² Delafield asserts it here as a word that cannot be used in Alex’s family circle even though in the 1890s the term had not yet acquired its popular association with homosexuality. The historical location of Delafield’s narrative allows her to establish a paradox in which lesbianism can be articulated by vocabulary comprehensible to the informed reader, but cannot be intimated between the characters of the novel, partly because the language used, however allusive, would not be comprehensible in their historical setting. This paradox exemplifies the possibilities of “knowing and not knowing” in the middlebrow text. For the reader who chooses to follow Delafield’s reference, the implication of “morbidity” and therefore lesbianism helps precipitate Alex into her abortive engagement to Noel Cardew. Alex enjoys the sensation of success that attends Noel’s interest in her, but is disturbed by the eventual realities of marriage. When Noel makes an “easy allusion to his hypothetical daughters”, Alex is shocked: “she wondered why such a startling sense of protest had revolted within her at his words, but her mind shied away instinctively from the question, and she found herself unable to pursue it” (140). Alex may not pursue her anxiety about the possibility of procreation, but the reader is invited to by Delafield’s phrasing, which suggests that Alex is antipathetic to heterosexual relations. Alex recognises that Noel has no uncontrollable desire for her “with an intense and involuntary relief” (144); she has craved love from Queenie, but shrinks from the possibility of genuine passion from Noel.

The prolonged, agonising scene in which Alex must choose her engagement ring, with her parents, Noel and Noel’s mother as an audience, emphasises how unfitted she is for heterosexual marriage: “conscious of an unspeakable oppression”, Alex is mortified by the public manifestation of her engagement (150-151). She is mortified still further by her bathetic first kiss during which her heartfelt but unspoken wish is that Noel would “be quick and get it over!” (155). When Alex breaks off the engagement, Delafield reiterates the compulsory nature of heterosexual marriage for young

⁴⁵² Browne, p12

people of her class and era, a system in which “their parents held the stakes” with the young couple “only puppets for whom strings were pulled, so as to cause certain vibrations and reactions” (178). Delafield suggests that not only the arrangements of marriage but also the nature of sexual desire itself are within the control of parents. In this context, Alex’s lesbianism emphasises and radicalises Delafield’s feminist message, that women should be able to direct their own lives. If Alex had the freedom to make her own choices, she might choose not to marry at all. Alex’s relationship with Noel can be contrasted with the relationship between Joan Ogden and Richard Benson in Hall’s *The Unlit Lamp*. Joan is Alex’s contemporary, but from a different social class, and she is able both to reject Richard’s proposal of marriage on the grounds that she is “not the marrying sort” and to retain his friendship.⁴⁵³ Joan, better educated and with the slightly greater freedom allowed to a middle-class girl, is able to understand her own nature and to articulate it. Joan’s eventual choices lead her to an end almost as martyred and tragic as Alex’s, however, since she is even more constrained than Alex by family duty. Depictions of the martyred or suicidal lesbian may be ways of shifting a lesbian character back into traditionally feminine models of the self-abnegating and altruistic woman, reasserting the value of femininity and preserving the conservative surface of the middlebrow text.⁴⁵⁴ Nevertheless, middlebrow fiction could engage with the notion of a happy ending for a woman like Joan or Alex: Muriel Hammond in *The Crowded Street* is denied a proper education and prepared only for the marriage market, but also rejects a proposal of marriage from an eligible young man, choosing instead to make her home with the political activist Delia Vaughan. Holtby’s narrative, while ensuring that both women have had conventional, heterosexual romances, valorises their home together and Muriel’s wifely attentions:

Muriel sat by the fire at 53a Maple Street knitting a jumper for Delia. The flames glowed on the silk between her fingers, until the sheen of it gleamed like molten copper. The supper table was laid for two. Blue and yellow pottery, a vase filled with tawny chrysanthemums, and Muriel’s workbag of bright-coloured silk hanging from the chair, gave to the room an intimate charm.⁴⁵⁵

The depiction of Muriel and Delia’s comfortable and attractive home, full of bright colours, soft textures and warmth, contrasts sharply with Alex’s final home – the only room of her own she ever has – at Malden Road, with its “short leather sofa with horse-hair breaking out of it in patches”, and indeed with Alex’s general tendency to be out of place (382). Wendy Gan has argued that Holtby “in her struggles with the romance plot never considered a lesbian romance plot for her spinster heroines”,⁴⁵⁶ however, I contend that, through her allusive characterisation and her idyllic and idealistic portrayal of female homosocial domesticity in this novel, Holtby does suggest the lesbian romance as a possibility for women. She develops the feminist argument pursued by Delafield and Hall – that marriage should not be the only opportunity for women – by

⁴⁵³ Hall, *The Unlit Lamp*, p134

⁴⁵⁴ Wallace, p5

⁴⁵⁵ Holtby, *The Crowded Street*, p245

⁴⁵⁶ Wendy Gan, ‘A return to romance: Winifred Holtby’s spinster novels from between the wars’, *Orbis Litterarum*, 58 (2003) 202–218 (p216)

demonstrating what some of those opportunities might be and including within them the possibility of lesbian relationships.

Alex's relationship with Mother Gertrude is perhaps the most significant indicator of her lesbianism. They meet when Alex is at a point of crisis in her life, having broken off her engagement and failed to attract further suitors. Mother Gertrude is ostensibly interested in Alex's spiritual welfare, but the narrative insists on her physicality:

She was an exceptionally tall, upright woman, a natural dignity of carriage emphasised by the sweeping black folds of veil and habit [...] Her strong, handsome face, of a uniform light reddish colour, showed one or two hard lines, noticeably around the closed, determined mouth, and her strongly-marked eyebrows almost met over straight-gazing, very light grey eyes. Even her religious habit could not conceal the lines and contour of a magnificent figure, belonging to a woman in the full maturity of life [...] Her voice was deep and of a commanding quality that seemed to match her personality, but her smile was her least attractive feature. It was only a slow widening of her mouth, showing a set of patently porcelain teeth, and deepening the creases on either side of her face. (213)

Mother Gertrude's height, bearing and physiognomy suggest masculinity, evoking Ellis's insistence on "a more or less distinct trace of masculinity"⁴⁵⁷ as a marker of lesbianism, although her "magnificent figure" reminds the reader of her sexuality. Her "patently porcelain teeth" and similarly false smile suggest to the reader that this nun may not be all she seems. Having earlier in the novel suggested that nuns may choose to exploit lesbian affections for spiritual gain, Delafield implies that Alex now may be at risk of such exploitation. Mother Gertrude is the nearest approach to the stereotype of the predatory lesbian in Delafield's novel; her first conversation with Alex suggests that their meeting may not have been the coincidence it appears: "It is curious that you should have turned out to be one of our children [...] You have been brought here by what looks like a strange chance." (215-216) The phrase "what looks like" suggests that no chance has been involved; that in fact, Mother Gertrude knew about Alex and had, perhaps, encouraged her maid, a regular communicant, to bring her to the convent.

The narrative undermines the claim of happiness that Mother Gertrude makes for herself and for the religious life: "There was a long silence, Alex watching the nun's fervent, flame-like gaze, in which her young idolatry detected none of the resolute fanaticism built up in instinctive self-protection from a temperament no less ardent than her own." (223) The implication is that Mother Gertrude resembles Alex in her sexual preferences, and her "resolute fanaticism" may mask her own sexuality; the phrase "built up" suggests that Mother Gertrude has actively constructed her religious persona to hide and control a lesbian sexuality, while the word "instinctive" suggests that she is unaware of any of this. Mother Gertrude embodies Humble's notion of "knowing and not knowing" about lesbianism and her ambiguously presented self-knowledge allows both the character and the reader to recognise and ignore her implicit sexuality. Alex's realisation that she may have a vocation to the religious life is described in ambiguous terms:

⁴⁵⁷ Ellis, p87

Alex was strongly conscious of that indefinable sensation of having made some strange, almost unguessed-at progress in a direction of which she was now only becoming aware. It frightened her when the Superior, gazing at her with those light, steady eyes that now held a depth of undisguised tenderness, spoke firmly, with an implication that could no longer be denied or ignored. (249)

As with the description of Mother Gertrude discussed above, the presentation of Alex's subjectivity emphasises how she both knows and does not know herself. She is "strongly conscious" of a mental state that is "indefinable" and "unguessed-at". This circumlocution about Alex's vocation is also typical of the middlebrow articulation of notions of lesbianism, which cannot address the subject directly but can only approach it by allusion or indirect reference. The paragraph could indeed be about lesbianism rather than about becoming a nun.

The representation of Alex's love for Mother Gertrude is much less ambiguous. Although it is camouflaged by the notion of spiritual development, the narrative is frank about Alex's powerful desire for the older woman. Alex is "fascinated" by her; kissed on the forehead by Mother Gertrude, she goes home "in ecstasy"; when the nun confides in her, she is in a "state of exaltation" (219-224). The narrative makes explicit Alex's own confusion about her feelings: "Had she sought in Mother Gertrude's society the relief of self-expression only, or was her infatuation for the nun the channel through which she hoped to find those abstract possessions of the spirit which might constitute the happiness she craved?" (255) Delafield's sentence is again ambiguous, indicating the possibility both of the spiritual fulfilment of religious faith, and of sexual love, another abstract possession. When Alex takes her perpetual vows, waiting has "inflamed her ardour" for an "overwhelming transformation" (271). Delafield alludes to the transformative effect of ordinary marriage and establishes a connection between Alex's vows, the marriage sacrament and consequent access to sexual activity. While these allusions contribute to the construction of Alex's character as lesbian, the context of religious life allows for the possibility that Alex may be genuinely religious rather than simply in love with Mother Gertrude, and for the reader to both know and not know that Alex may be lesbian. This ambiguity is undercut, however, when Mother Gertrude announces that she will be leaving Alex's convent, and Alex, "quivering from head to foot" (274), enters a state of nervous collapse at their parting:

Her whole body was absorbed in the supreme act of awaiting the superior's return for the word, the look, that should at least break the dreadful darkness that encompassed her soul at the sudden deprivation of that one outlet which had, unaware, served as a safety-valve for the whole craving dependence of her spirit. (284)

Delafield continues to insist on the physicality of Alex's reaction to this trauma: when she realises her whole career as a nun has been based on her love for Mother Gertrude, she experiences "[p]hysical pangs of terror" (286). This emphasis on physicality roots Alex's experiences in the sexual and is the most explicit characterisation of her as lesbian; she has pursued her love into a hostile environment professing a faith that she does not possess and obeying rules that she does not consider right. However, the context of the spiritual life and its regulations allow Delafield to

construct alternate readings in which Alex is simply unsuited to convent life, and to maintain the possibility for the reader of both knowing and not knowing the nature of her desires.

Consequences is one of the earliest representations of lesbianism discussed in this chapter, and as well as drawing on knowledge of sexological models of sexuality, emerges from the tradition of the ghostly, allusive and connoted lesbian available to earlier writers. However, Delafield's use of allusion and misdirection, keeping at least two possible interpretations of Alex's character and behaviour in play at any one time, constructs an exemplary middlebrow fiction allowing the reader to both know and not know about Alex's sexuality. This strategy enables Delafield to construct a forceful feminist argument, at a historical point when fears about the effect of surplus women were at their highest, without alienating the antipathetic reader by making Alex's lesbianism explicit. By 1918 only Stella Browne among feminist writers had engaged in any way with the topic of lesbianism, and her works were available to a very limited audience. Feminist writers, including lesbian feminist writers, were anxious about expressing lesbian meaning in their work due to the negative association of feminism with lesbianism. However, for those who could or would decode Delafield's allusive text – and those who could and would were presumably sympathetic readers – her presentation of a young woman who is congenitally unfit for marriage because of her sexuality strengthens, rather than complicates, her argument, since such women must have choices other than marriage if they are to escape Alex's tragic fate. Delafield negotiates the middlebrow category to assert through her text two political arguments of different degrees of radicalism; but the text's middlebrow qualities include a conservatism of form and content that will not disrupt the mainstream reader's pleasure in the text.

The lesbian sideshow: *Challenge to Clarissa* and *The Provincial Lady in War-Time*

Delafield frequently uses minor lesbian characters for the purposes of comedy or satire. I argue that Delafield uses such comic characters to create a lesbian sideshow, a device which deflects the attribution of lesbianism away from a work's central protagonists, particularly when these protagonists may be read as overtly feminist and an additional lesbian reading would render the text too disruptive and threatening. In this section I focus on two such paired characterisations: Elinor Fish and Olivia King featured in *Challenge to Clarissa* (1931) and the nameless Commandant and Darling from *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* (1940). Both these books were published after *The Well of Loneliness* and its attendant scandal, and I demonstrate how the ambiguous or ghostly representations of lesbianism possible before the publication of Hall's novel have become impossible, and the connotative markers of lesbianism used in 1920s middlebrow fiction have become explicit indicators of alternative sexuality. I analyse how the middlebrow representation of lesbianism develops after this point, from constructing meaning that can be both "known and not known" to developing explicit and visible representations of lesbianism but in a manner that is tolerable to the conservative and traditional requirements of the middlebrow category, through the

use of humour and comedy. Doan argues that spinster stereotypes in fiction, “effectively cloak [...] the more dangerous threat of an autonomous woman”;⁴⁵⁸ I argue that the lesbian sideshow performs a similar function, making feminist meaning more palatable to a middlebrow readership. I also explore, however, the ways in which this limited representation of lesbianism breaks down in middlebrow fiction: *Challenge to Clarissa* has much in common with D.E. Stevenson’s *Miss Bunce’s Book* (1934) in which a lesbian relationship is presented with humour but also affection and a degree of celebration. Similarly, the negative presentation of the Commandant and Darling in *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* must be read in the context of the primary relationship in the novel between the Provincial Lady and her younger friend Serena Brown. I go on to evaluate the ways in which Delafield works within the greater conservatism of 1930s and 1940s middlebrow writing, and the implications of her narrative choices for the feminist meaning of her texts.

In *The Provincial Lady Goes Further*, the protagonist’s encounter with a well-known novelist (the Carina of the quotation below) and her companion Miss P. provides a first, brief example of the lesbian sideshow in Delafield’s work:

Miss P. tells me that Carina [...] is Perfectly Wonderful. Her Work is Wonderful, and so are her methods, her Personality, her Vitality and her Charm. I say Yes, a great many times, and feel I can quite understand why Carina has Miss P. to live with her. (Am only too certain that neither Felicity nor dear Rose would dream of presenting me to visitors in similar light, should occasion for doing so ever arise.) [...] Felicity and I fetch as many of Carina’s works as we can collect from Boots’, and read them industriously. Great excitement on discovering that one of them – the best-known – is dedicated to Carina’s Beloved Friend, D.P., whom we immediately identify as Miss Postman, Felicity maintaining that D. stands for Daisy, whilst I hold out for Doris. Discussion closes with ribald reference to *Well of Loneliness*.⁴⁵⁹

This passage allows Delafield to convey a number of meanings. She underplays the possibility that the Provincial Lady, a feminist and a published author living for part of the time in Bloomsbury, could be lesbian. She draws out the humour to be found in the enthusiastic worship of a woman for her female companion; she undermines any possibility of lesbian affection between the Provincial Lady and her friend by stating that Felicity would express no such enthusiasm; and she reinforces the status of *The Well of Loneliness* as an explicit intertextual marker of lesbianism. She also creates subversive meaning which draws out the positive possibilities of lesbian relationships: Carina is successful and lives with a partner who appreciates her best qualities, while the Provincial Lady must return home to her husband Robert, who “shows no interest” in this visit “after enquiring whether there wasn’t a man anywhere about the place, and being told Only the Gardener”.⁴⁶⁰ Any potential subversive endorsement of lesbianism is in turn subverted by the suggestion that a household without a man is not worth discussing.

Challenge to Clarissa, published only one year after the *Well of Loneliness* prosecution, is a complex comedy of manners in which the nouveau riche and autocratic Clarissa seeks to prevent

⁴⁵⁸ Laura Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, Press, 1991), p1

⁴⁵⁹ E.M. Delafield, *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (London: Macmillan, 1939 (1930)), pp187-189

⁴⁶⁰ *The Provincial Lady Goes Further*, p189

the marriage of her son Lucien to her stepdaughter Sophie through her control of the family money. Clarissa is thwarted in turn by Sophie's grandmother, the Princesse de Candi-Laquerrière, who bribes Clarissa's husband Fitzmaurice to persuade Clarissa to allow the marriage, which he does by threatening to leave. Fitzmaurice is Clarissa's one weak spot, and she yields. Elinor Fish and Olivia King are minor characters in the novel; Olivia King is the sister of Clarissa's land agent and they live near Clarissa's country house. Elinor is an Oxford-educated, cultured woman, entirely uninterested in her personal appearance, enthusiastic to the point of brashness and inclined to be indiscreet. Olivia is more reticent, elegantly dressed and intelligent, the author of several successful novels. There are a large number of minor characters in *Challenge to Clarissa* who function partly as comedic and partly to move along the action; others are simply foils for the major characters. In a comedy of manners well supplied with minor characters, what is the function of Elinor Fish and Olivia King? I argue that they constitute a sideshow element, distracting the reader from the possibility of reading the powerful and somewhat masculine Clarissa as lesbian and/or dangerously autonomous. Clarissa is feminine in appearance, but the narrative ensures we see the inauthenticity of this. Her mouth is "outlined to an outrageously improbable Cupid's bow" but her face is "hard, shrewd and full of an essential coarseness".⁴⁶¹ Clarissa's defining characteristic, essential to the plot of the novel, is her tyranny expressed through control of her own money and property and articulated in a repeated refrain: "This house is mine, and the London house is mine, and the whole of the money is mine" (286). Clarissa's power, control of her money and autocratic management of her family place her in the traditional position of a dominant patriarch. All these characteristics might reasonably constitute a lesbian characterisation, and had become considerably more legible since the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*. To distract from this reading, which would complicate the depiction of her central character and also the plot of the novel, which relies on Clarissa's love for her husband, Delafield creates more overt lesbian meaning among her minor characters.

Delafield's approach to the representation of the relationship between Elinor Fish and Olivia King is considerably more direct than her characterisation of Alex. However, elements of the middlebrow construction of sexuality as something to be known and not known persist. She introduces the characters with a convoluted disavowal of a sexual aspect to their relationship:

The understanding between these two ladies had survived the experiment of a joint household, several trips abroad, and even, as Miss Fish resentfully observed, the fuss about *The Well of Loneliness*, that had put so many normal and respectable single women under the wholly unnecessary strain of being obliged to consider the breath of scandal with regard to relationships into which such a thing had not hitherto entered. (109)

As this sentence indicates, middlebrow ambiguity is difficult to maintain in the context of much greater legibility of lesbianism. *The Well of Loneliness* is an explicit intertextual reference that has only one clear meaning, and acts as a shorthand indicator of lesbianism. By referring to the book

⁴⁶¹ E.M. Delafield, *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931), pp6-9. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

directly, Delafield establishes the possibility of a lesbian relationship between the two women. The complexities of this sentence develop this possibility further. It is the threat of scandal, rather than of sexuality, that has entered into relationships and caused strain: that is, the possibility of open knowledge, rather than ambiguous supposition, of a sexual relationship between two women. Elinor and Olivia may belong to the group of “normal and respectable single women” who, thanks to Radclyffe Hall’s work, may now be thought of as lesbian; or they may simply be lesbians. The apparent disavowal is nothing of the kind, but rather a sly hint to the reader that their relationship is in fact a lesbian one. It also exemplifies the difficulty for the middlebrow text of the transition from connotative to overt depictions of lesbianism.

Delafield goes on to construct their relationship in much the same way as she does heterosexual marriages in her other novels. To describe Elinor, the narrative frequently moves to Olivia’s viewpoint, which is often critical; she feels that “Elinor Fish was more trouble than she was worth”, warns her against social indiscretions, and despairs of her clothes (120-122). Socialising with Elinor is not always a comfortable activity for the novelist: like Miss Postman in *The Provincial Lady Goes Further*, “Miss Fish [...] always took a generous pride in her friend’s achievements, and was, indeed, sometimes too apt to make Olivia feel like the rabbit of a conjurer’s trick.” (116) However, the women are more compatible in many ways than Delafield’s husbands and wives: Olivia is “almost the only person who could meet Miss Fish upon an equality” in terms of intellect and experience (110); they are also physically well matched, as “[h]ardly anyone ever walked as fast, or as far, as Miss Fish, but Olivia came nearest to it” (114). Their little sub-plot within the novel details Olivia’s growing frustration with Elinor’s “noisy excitement” (239); her tendency to “thrust [her]self into the affairs of strangers uninvited” causes the women to quarrel (249). By the end of the novel, however, Olivia wonders if she is “not always sufficiently appreciative of Elinor’s good qualities” (307). In the context of Delafield’s other fiction, the narrative of Olivia’s emotional response to Elinor resembles that of other unsatisfied wives, such as Laura in *The Way Things Are* (1927) or Mary Morgan in *Gay Life* (1933), although the representation is more deliberately humorous and less serious, and ultimately points to a more positive future life together. This resemblance to Delafield’s other narratives of marriage supports a reading of their relationship as analogous to marriage and imparts to it the significance of a marital relationship.

The characterisation of Elinor Fish develops the markers of lesbian characters used in 1920s middlebrow fiction. As well as being educated at Oxford, she has written a number of unpublished works, including one discussing “Some New Aspects of Feminism” (110); she therefore fits into the category of educated, feminist women associated with lesbianism. Elinor’s rejection of the trappings of femininity, which is contrasted with the feminine appearance of the Princesse and of Olivia herself, is another middlebrow indicator of lesbianism (114-115). Elinor’s masculine characteristics are mainly physical in nature: she has a deep voice, walks with a “military swing of her shoulders”, stands “with her feet planted rather far apart, in a manly way” (240) and is often to be seen with a walking-stick, which she is seen “waving”, “wagging [...] humorously” and

using to “strick[e] the ground vigorously” (248-249). The particularly physical nature of Elinor’s masculinity, and her use and control of a phallic symbol, reinforce ideas of her physically expressed sexuality, underpinning her probable lesbianism, and deflecting attention from the psychically masculine qualities of Clarissa Fitzmaurice. Elinor Fish also actually shares her house with a woman and is aligned with earlier representations of lesbianism by her education and her feminism. Elinor and Olivia therefore function effectively as a lesbian sideshow in the novel, drawing any attribution of lesbianism away from Clarissa, and de-emphasising her autonomous status.

What, then, is the impact of the lesbian sideshow on the feminist meaning of *Challenge to Clarissa*? The novel does not easily yield up a feminist viewpoint. Clarissa herself is an entirely negative character, despite her personal strength, vitality and independence. There is a class-based valorisation of the type of female power that attaches to the Princesse; the nouveau riche Clarissa is described as “vulgar” and “hard” while the Princesse is praised for her “pure *ancien régime*” charm. The main feminist argument of the text is that of *Consequences* and several other Delafield novels: young women like Sophie should be able to choose their own husbands, not be hustled into a suitable marriage by their parents; and overbearing parents sap the agency of their daughters, leaving them unable to assert their own will. But the representation of Elinor and Olivia’s relationship does not support the argument for greater freedom for young women in any obvious way. Nor does it represent a realistic alternative for Sophie; if she does not marry Lucien, she will surely marry her stepmother’s choice of suitable young man. It could, however, be a realistic alternative for some of Delafield’s readership. Such a reading is supported by the broadly positive representation of Elinor, who is invariably good-humoured and liked by the other characters, and the almost unfailingly positive characterisation of the well-dressed, socially adept Olivia. In their last scene in the novel, after their successful party, Olivia leaves the door open so that departing guests can hear Elinor’s delighted endorsement of their joint endeavour, a gesture which sites their relationship in an open, positive context. But this reading is complicated by Elinor’s conformity with stereotypical characterisations of spinsters in the novels of this period, by Olivia’s frustrations, and by the comic sideshow function of the couple in the novel. Delafield is not making an overt argument about the beneficial possibilities of lesbianism, but the narrative yields a subversive suggestion that homosocial relationships may be a positive choice for women outside the class of Sophie or the Princesse – and within the class of Delafield’s readership.

A similar use of the lesbian sideshow appears in D.E. Stevenson’s *Miss Buncle’s Book* (1934). The eponymous heroine, short of money, writes a comic novel in which the inhabitants of her village appear, thinly disguised; life imitates art to an unforeseen degree, as Miss Buncle’s neighbours begin to act out the plots assigned to them. Among the villagers appearing in the book are Ellen King and Angela Pretty, two women who have lived together for some years. Ellen King has some points in common with Elinor Fish, being “confident and capable”, tending to a

“manliness of attire”, and possessing a deep voice.⁴⁶² As with Elinor and Olivia, the “breath of scandal” has entered into the lives of Ellen and Angela due to the impact of *The Well of Loneliness*: “There was a book some years ago [...] it distressed us very much at the time, but it had nothing to do with us, and I decided to ignore it” (78). Like Delafield, Stevenson uses the allusion to Hall’s text to establish the possibility of a lesbian relationship between the women in a sentence that attempts to deny any such possibility. The humour in Stevenson’s narrative arises from Ellen King’s attempt to suppress another dangerous book, Miss Buncle’s own book, which represents her and Angela – libellously, in Ellen’s view – as travelling to Samarkand, which she views as “a dreadful Eastern place – full of vice and – and horribleness” (79). As well as enabling self-reflexive comedy, Miss King and Miss Pretty ensure that Miss Buncle herself, a “thin, dowdy woman of forty” (14) is not read as lesbian and that her apparent female autonomy is not too assertive; as in *Challenge to Clarissa*, such a reading would work against the plot of the novel, which concludes with Miss Buncle’s marriage to her publisher. Additionally, Miss Buncle and her books are disruptive enough within the text; further sexual disruption might be excessively challenging for a middlebrow readership and interfere with readerly pleasure in the comic text.

Miss Buncle’s Book is not a particularly feminist text; its humour derives from the self-reflexive impact of the eponymous book, and its various marriage plots are conventional in outcome, if fantastically achieved. Possibly because of the dominance of traditional and conservative views in the novel, it is able to go further than *Challenge to Clarissa* in its positive representation of a lesbian relationship. When Angela becomes unwell with a chronic chest complaint during the novel, Ellen is advised to take her to Egypt for the climate. Discussing their relationship with Dr Walker, an old friend, Ellen worries that “I’m bad for Angela, John. I have begun to think she would be better without me. She depends upon me too much. Sometimes I think she is beginning to lose her identity altogether [...] I love her too much. I fuss over her too much” (172-173). The doctor is appalled: “What on earth are you talking about, Ellen? I thought you had more sense [...] You’ve done such a lot for her, you’ve been wonderful to her, Ellen [...] you’re not bad for her, it’s absurd and ridiculous to think so [...] You must go and look after her, she needs you” (172-173). Dr Walker’s endorsement of their relationship is based partly on Angela’s “woman’s nature”, which is “weak and vacillating” (173) and requires Ellen’s masculine qualities as support, but nonetheless it is a strongly positive view of a lesbian partnership by an outsider, which acknowledges the genuine love between the women.

In both texts, the lesbian relationship is included mostly for its comedic value, and in each text it brings the added benefit of ensuring other characters can be read as heterosexual and supportive of gender norms. There is no particular reason for these characters to be in the novels except to function as a lesbian sideshow. However, both novels elect to go further, and make overt or implicit arguments for the seriousness and validity of lesbian relationships. The lesbian sideshow

⁴⁶² D.E. Stevenson, *Miss Buncle’s Book* (London: Persephone, 2008 (1934)), p65. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

in these texts functions to ensure that lesbian meaning, now so legible, is not carried by central characters, and to advance, by stealth or by accident, a feminist argument about the sexual choices available to women and the potential for happiness outside heterosexual marriage. It also functions as a literary device which allows the text to maintain readability for the majority of the readership, who can be presumed to be heteronormative; for the alert and sympathetic reader, however, detection of the device may also contribute to readerly pleasure in the text. Both texts also contribute to a development of the general characterisations of lesbians in fiction; earlier fictional representations “create an image of them as *the only one* in their community, as isolated individuals [...] suffering and essentially unfulfilled, intended to arouse pity rather than condemnation”.⁴⁶³ By focusing, in a minor but positive way, on professionally successful or financially comfortable lesbians in relationships and accepted within communities, these texts develop a literary alternative to the tragic lesbian martyr of 1920s texts. In the characters of Olivia King and Angela Pretty, the novels also keep in view the feminine lesbian, a character who disappears from most novels dealing with lesbianism after the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*.

In *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* the lesbian sideshow again makes use of two minor characters, known only as “the Commandant” and “Darling”. The Commandant is in charge of the ARP station where the Provincial Lady volunteers to work in the canteen. She is described as a “dark, rather good-looking young woman wearing out-size [sic] in slacks and leather jacket using immensely long black cigarette-holder, and writing at wooden trestle-table piled with papers”, and the illustration in the first edition depicts her in this masculine dress with short hair and a scowling face.⁴⁶⁴ The Commandant is characterised as rude, high-handed and self-important from the outset: she “utters without looking up for a moment – which I think highly offensive”; the Provincial Lady considers her personality “un-endearing” and her “tones very peremptory indeed” (83-84). The Commandant rarely engages directly with her staff: as well as having a gaze always “glued to her fast-moving pen”, her methods of communication include “mutters”, “snarling” and a “[s]ound like a sharp bark” (119-120). Delafield’s characterisation is an entirely negative one established for the purposes of satirising the self-important woman war-worker; unlike Elinor Fish, the Commandant has no likeable qualities.

The Provincial Lady is required to serve the Commandant with a meal, and her fussy demands lead the diarist to “[d]ebate flinging the whole thing at her head, which I should enjoy doing” and Cook to express the “heart-felt hope that it may choke her” (121-122). The violence of these unrealised desires and hopes indicate the strength of feeling the Commandant arouses: she is a petty tyrant, over-persuaded of her own importance to the war effort, and a common enemy to the staff and volunteers at the ARP station, with the exception of her companion Darling. Darling

⁴⁶³ Gabriele Griffin, *Heavenly Love? Lesbian Images in Twentieth-Century Women’s Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p11, emphasis in original

⁴⁶⁴ E.M. Delafield, *The Provincial Lady in War-Time* (London: Macmillan, 1940), p82. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

is a “smart-looking person in blue trousers and singlet and admirable make-up” (85) whose main role in the narrative is to persuade the Commandant to eat:

She must, says Darling, absolutely *must* have something. She has been here since nine o'clock and during that time what has she had? One cup of coffee and a tomato. It isn't enough on which to do a heavy day's work.

Commandant – writing again resumed and eyes on paper – asserts that it's all she wants. She hasn't time for more. Does Darling realise that there's a *war* on, and not a minute to spare? (87, emphasis in original)

The narrative notes, in passing, the progress of their relationship: “She and Darling has a quarrel at six o'clock this morning because Darling brought her a plate of minced ham and the Commandant refused to touch it on the grounds of having No Time. Darling reported to have left the premises in a black fury.” (127) However, a little later, harmony has been restored: “Darling and the Commandant have made up their quarrel and are never out of one another's pockets for a single instant.” (212) The expression “never out of one another's pockets” not only reinforces the emotional intimacy between the two women, but also suggests a sexual familiarity with each others' clothing and bodies. Because the other characters in the novel recognise and discuss this relationship, it acquires a certain status and significance, particularly in the female-dominated context of the ARP station. However, no value is associated with this relationship: since the characters are unpopular in the context of the novel, their relationship is not endorsed by the text. The Provincial Lady is careful to distinguish her own working methods from those of the Commandant: “Make note not to let myself be affected by aura of agitation surrounding Commandant and friend.” (89) This need to separate herself from the Commandant forms part of Delafield's satire of women in authority, but also hints that the Commandant's sexuality might be contagious, and infect the reading of the primary homosocial relationship in the novel, that of the Provincial Lady with Serena Brown.

Serena, an ARP colleague already slightly known to the Provincial Lady, is characterised from the outset as attractive, petite and feminine: “She is young and rather pretty, with enormous round eyes, and looks as if she might – at outside – weigh seven and a half stone” (55). She expresses “delight” at seeing the Provincial Lady again and their conversation becomes immediately intimate (56); the two women bond over their amusement at a fellow worker, and discuss Serena's sleeping arrangements, a “horrible-looking little canvas affair about three inches off the floor, swung on poles like inferior sort of hammock” (57-59). The text's development of the Provincial Lady's semi-maternal and semi-erotic interest in Serena begins with her suggestion that Serena should come to her flat “when she likes and rest on properly constructed divan” (59). In the next diary entry, Serena is making use of the Provincial Lady's bathroom “on door of which she has pinned paper marked ENGAGED – at unnatural hour of 2 p.m.” (61). The illustrations in the first edition again emphasise Serena's position as an erotic focus in the text by depicting her emerging from the bathroom in a brief slip, her eyes suitably enormous (61).

A domestic intimacy develops between the two women, an intimacy entirely absent from the relationship of the Commandant and Darling, who are only ever seen together at work. The Provincial Lady becomes a source of guidance for Serena, offering to help her get used to war-time life, including practising wearing gas-masks; the refugees who share Serena's flat are greatly alarmed "at sight presented by Serena and myself [...] are startled nearly out of their senses and enquire in great agitation What is happening" (77-78). This mild farce relies for its humour on anxieties about invasion and attack but also invites consideration of what other startling activities the two women might choose to pursue.

The Provincial Lady's interest in Serena's well-being sits at the boundaries of maternal and romantic interest because it is so frequently expressed in terms of Serena's bodily needs. She advises Serena that "she has undertaken a form of war service which is undoubtedly going to result in her speedy collapse from want of sleep, fresh air, and properly-regulated existence generally" (166). This physical attentiveness, and the understanding between the two women that allows such advice to be spoken, emphasises the potential of their intimacy. However, the Provincial Lady is careful to distinguish their relationship from that of the Commandant and Darling: when dealing with an emotional Serena, she notes that she has "no wish [...] to emulate Darling's methods with Commandant" (167), a remark that asserts the entirely different nature of her relationship with Serena and reminds the reader that any lesbian meaning in the narrative should be attributed only to the Commandant and Darling.

Delafield's lesbian sideshow in *The Provincial Lady in War-Time*, when compared to *Challenge to Clarissa*, is in many ways a homophobic one. This hostility can be detected in other middlebrow works set in the 1930s, such as Stella Gibbons's *Miss Linsey and Pa* (1936) which features the predatory, possessive and masculine Dorothy Hoad, "one of those horrible women",⁴⁶⁵ or Naomi Royde-Smith's *The Island* (1930), with its deranged and manipulative lesbian characters. The unattractive characterisations of Darling and the Commandant leave no room for the type of ambiguously positive depiction of lesbianism established through the characters of Elinor Fish and Olivia King. This strongly negative characterisation strengthens the sideshow effect, ensuring that the possibilities of lesbian meaning are carried by two entirely antipathetic characters who can be exploited for the purposes of satire, and presenting the primary homosocial relationship between the Provincial Lady and Serena as one of non-erotic friendship.

The Provincial Lady in War-Time lacks the significant male characters and the romance plot available in *Challenge to Clarissa*. It is set in a female-dominated world where women are able to act with a degree of independence and where war-work provides a legitimate reason for wives like the Provincial Lady to live apart from their husbands. Both the literary and the social context make the possibility of lesbian relationships more likely; it therefore becomes more important to deflect this possibility away from Delafield's protagonist and ensure it is attached instead to minor characters.

⁴⁶⁵ Stella Gibbons, *Miss Linsey and Pa* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1936), p63

This need for deflection may account for the hostile characterisation of Darling and the Commandant, and for the marked masculinity of the Commandant, another way in which lesbian meaning is carried away from the Provincial Lady's relationship with Serena. Serena's feminine appearance and behaviour is regularly noted in the text, contrasting strongly with that of the Commandant. Representing a world where heteronormative relationships are disrupted by war, the middlebrow novel cannot easily accommodate overtly positive representations of non-normative sexualities; and in a novel in which the protagonist can be seen as exemplary in her pursuit of war-work, and in her pursuit of mutually supportive relationship with other women workers, her exemplary status would be compromised by the possibility of lesbianism.

However, Delafield's characterisation of Serena and the development of her relationship with the Provincial Lady leave open the possibility of an erotically charged relationship between two socially adept and acceptable women. To some extent, Delafield's text reverts to the position of both "knowing and not knowing" about lesbianism; the reader cannot avoid knowing about the lesbianism of the Commandant and Darling, but knowledge of the possibilities in the Provincial Lady's friendship relies on an active engagement with the text and its implicit meanings. Although the novel contains overtly lesbian characters, it continues to work within middlebrow norms, creating another type of lesbian meaning through hints and allusions.

In all of her novels discussed in this chapter, Delafield makes use of middlebrow approaches to fiction to allow her to represent lesbian characters and articulate subversive but limited feminist arguments about the particular circumstances of lesbian lives. The use of allusion and connotation, humour and satire, as literary means of lesbian characterisation, connects Delafield's work to that of other middlebrow writers engaging with sexuality, as does the essentially conservative resolution of her narratives. The middlebrow sought to connect its readers with the social avant-garde, presenting sophisticated or challenging material in a palatable and acceptable literary form.⁴⁶⁶ Delafield creates lesbian meaning in texts that respect the formal boundaries of the middlebrow; however, within those boundaries she is able – for those readers who wish to see – to contribute to nascent articulations of lesbian identity and the positive possibilities of lesbian relationships.

This middlebrow construction of the lesbian also supports the reader's pleasure and engagement with the text through both the presentation of sophisticated meaning and the opportunity for intertextual understanding. Delafield's novels form part of a subset of middlebrow writing by mainly feminist women which engages with lesbianism and in fact constitutes much of the public feminist discussion of lesbianism, which was extremely limited before 1928 and frequently hostile afterwards. However, as feminist thought and practice in the interwar period was little engaged with women's sexuality, let alone lesbian sexuality, Delafield's articulation of lesbian meaning can be read as disruptive of the feminism of her texts, and this may account for the

⁴⁶⁶ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p14

ultimately conservative effects of her narratives, and the increasing conservatism discernable in *The Provincial Lady in War-Time*. Feminist arguments about the freedom and agency of women could be undermined by lesbian meaning, given the prevailing social anxieties within and outside feminism about the increase of lesbianism and lesbian predation. Ensuring a tragic end for a lesbian heroine, or marginalising lesbian characters in a minor comic role, helps to contain those anxieties and reduce their impact on the broader feminist meaning of the text. Feminist middlebrow writers negotiated a repeated connotation and effacement of lesbian meaning while attempting to ensure that feminist meaning remained explicit.

As lesbianism itself became more visible and less allusive during the 1930s, it becomes useful to the middlebrow as a clearly separate social category, an 'other'; narratives can define characters against that other, reinforcing their heterosexuality and reassuring the heteronormative reader of the continuing dominance of the 'normal'. Lesbian characters could become oppositional to feminist characters in order to ensure that feminist meaning was conveyed without apparent threat to prevailing gender norms. But even hostile or oppositional lesbian characterisations allowed middlebrow writers to articulate lesbian identity and contribute to a growing lesbian visibility. Delafield pursues the twin paths of lesbian visibility and invisibility, maintaining an ambiguous representation of lesbian characters that sometimes supports her feminist intent, and sometimes detracts from it, playing into conservative notions of the association between feminism and lesbianism, but which also, for the enlightened reader, suggests the possibility of a positive representation of the lesbian within a middlebrow cultural context.

Chapter 3 “Darling, who knows best – you or mother?”: mothers and daughters

Delafield makes frequent use of mothers as anti-feminist, conservative forces who, rather than fathers, often take on the role of oppressor and controller of daughters. In this chapter I consider the feminist effect of narratives of oppressive motherhood and daughterly resistance in the context of the ambiguity between subversion and traditionalism throughout Delafield's work. Narratives of mother/daughter conflict are numerous in women's writing of the first half of the twentieth century, and these conflicts often focus on the daughter's desire for greater independence and the freedom to dispose of her own life as she chooses. This contested freedom may then allow her to work, to study or to marry for love rather than money or status. I also evaluate the ways in which narratives of mother/daughter relationships contribute to the development of ideas of women's agency and selfhood in the context of interwar feminism and anti-feminism; few of Delafield's rebellious daughters succeed in achieving the freedom they desire, and I argue that the conservatism that often characterises the middlebrow category determines narrative outcomes that undermine feminist arguments developed in the texts. However, I will also argue that elements of Delafield's fiction that define it as middlebrow also allow her to articulate her feminist arguments, and that she negotiates the category with care to ensure that the feminist meaning of her text may be obscured but is not effaced.

I discuss first the context for Delafield's mother-daughter narratives and relate them to the political and social era in which they were written as well as the era they depict; I then review theoretical and critical work relating to the theme of mother-daughter relationships. I go on to analyse two of Delafield's novels which deal with this theme: her early work *The Heel of Achilles* (1921), which presents mother-daughter conflict from the mother's perspective, and *Thank Heaven Fasting* (1932), in which the resistant daughter is the protagonist. Both these works are set in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods and depict mothers and daughters within upper- and upper-middle-class society. In the final section of this chapter I compare these representations with Virginia Woolf's depictions of mothers and daughters in two modernist works, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Years*, in order to explore the different ways in which modernist and middlebrow writers deal with material that is similar in terms of its historical and social setting and its political meaning. I identify an ambiguous approach in both texts, but argue that Woolf's approach develops a complex, nuanced argument about mothers and daughters while Delafield adopts a multivalent position that allows her to express, within the same text, conservative and radical opinions about this often difficult relationship.

Mothers and daughters before and after the First World War

Delafield was writing at a time of high social anxiety about female agency and female power. The press and anti-feminist campaigners during the 1920s were especially preoccupied with the new freedom of young women, with concern about the “flapper vote” increasing as feminists campaigned for the extension of suffrage to women under 30.⁴⁶⁷ Anxieties about greater female power increased substantially in a post-war context profoundly changed by the loss of men in the First World War, women’s developing social and political position, and their entry into traditionally male activities and professions.⁴⁶⁸ Delafield wrote several novels which take antipathy between mothers and daughters as their principal theme and sites these narratives in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. Her late Victorian dyadic model of oppressive mothers and resistant daughters can also be found in works by May Sinclair (*Mary Olivier*, 1919), Winifred Holtby (*The Crowded Street*, 1924) and Radclyffe Hall (*The Unlit Lamp*, 1924) as well as better-known modernist texts such as Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Years* (1937). These writers used this relatively recent historical setting in their fiction to examine issues and circumstances that remained contentious among their contemporaries, and also to review critically the period of their own upbringing.

As Carol Dyhouse has noted, late Victorian and Edwardian families generally subscribed to an ideal of femininity which required of women and especially mothers “economic and intellectual dependency; it prescribed service and self-sacrifice as quintessential forms of ‘womanly’ behaviour.”⁴⁶⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, “piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness” were “the qualities impressed on mothers by self-chosen child-care ‘experts’” which “kept alive the self-sacrificing ‘angel’ mother”⁴⁷⁰ and the ideals of service and selflessness in order to be able to provide “an environment in which *men* could live and work”.⁴⁷¹ Deborah Gorham identifies an inherent contradiction in an “ideal of feminine purity [that] is implicitly asexual” and the sexual and social responsibilities of wives; she suggests that this contradiction can be partly resolved by insisting on the total femininity of daughters who can be “perceived as a wholly unambiguous model of feminine dependence, childlike simplicity and sexual purity”.⁴⁷² The femininity of daughters, then, is central to the maintenance of family status and respectability; being adequately feminine, through the possession of qualities such as innocence, submissiveness and self-abnegation, becomes a daughter’s duty.⁴⁷³ Participation in the rituals of society was also constituted as a social duty, and it

⁴⁶⁷ Lucy Bland, ‘The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson: The Capital Crime of Sexual Incitement in 1920s England’ *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (July 2008), 624-648 (pp628-629)

⁴⁶⁸ Harold L Smith ‘British Feminism in the 1920s’ in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* ed. by Harold L. Smith (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990), 47-65 (p47)

⁴⁶⁹ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p2

⁴⁷⁰ E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), p20

⁴⁷¹ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p26

⁴⁷² Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p7

⁴⁷³ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p25

was a moral imperative for a girl to marry and therefore “enlarge her sphere of influence”.⁴⁷⁴ The contribution of daughters to the maintenance of social standing through correct feminine behaviour and advantageous marriage is of particular significance in the upper-middle-class settings of Delafield’s novels.

The historical counterparts of the upper- or upper-middle-class Victorian and Edwardian mothers described in Delafield’s fiction were often “rather remote figures”, with whom their children had “highly formal” relationships,⁴⁷⁵ since they were usually raised by nannies and saw their parents only at fixed times and in formal settings.⁴⁷⁶ Maternal duties for women of this class were therefore minimised, with social duties taking precedence.⁴⁷⁷ By the late Victorian period the function and structures of upper-class society had become preoccupied with the marriage market, and achieving a successful marriage was the primary social duty for mothers and daughters.⁴⁷⁸ In early adulthood, daughters of this social class would suddenly become the focus of maternal attention and be “groomed in fashion, deportment and etiquette ready for the ‘coming out’ party which would celebrate their entry into society, and more importantly, the marriage market”.⁴⁷⁹ It is this short period of initiation into womanhood which is usually the focus of Delafield’s texts, when mother and daughter are forced into often uncomfortable intimacy as daughters enter the upper-class social world. The rules of this world were complex and “[m]others were responsible for initiating their daughters into these mysteries”.⁴⁸⁰ The moral imperative to marry well required girls to be sexually attractive to young men while preserving their feminine innocence, a paradoxical position which introduced tension from the outset. Mothers also might fail to fully understand modern social and sexual conventions, insisting instead on the standards that operated during their own girlhood, creating further possibilities for tension and conflict.⁴⁸¹ The drama of Delafield’s fictions often emerges because mothers insist on enforcing regulations that they do not fully explain, possibly because an explicit description of the rules of the marriage market and the nature of liberties that could be taken, would compromise their need to preserve their daughters’ feminine innocence; consequently their daughters only half understand the rules of a game which they are never able to play properly, and disappointment and resentment ensue.

The late Victorian and Edwardian women who campaigned for women’s rights were particularly interested in the plight of the upper- or middle-class dependent daughter; “the frustrations and the sense of vulnerability attendant on being a ‘daughter-at-home’ were very widely

⁴⁷⁴ Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London: Cresset Library, 1986), p50

⁴⁷⁵ Loftur Guttormsson, ‘Parent-Child Relations’ in *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century 1789-1913* ed. by David I. Kertzer, and, Marzio Barbagli (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp251-281 (p266)

⁴⁷⁶ Gorham, p17

⁴⁷⁷ Davidoff, p53

⁴⁷⁸ Davidoff, 17

⁴⁷⁹ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p23

⁴⁸⁰ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p24

⁴⁸¹ Davidoff, p54

felt’’.⁴⁸² Such a life could be completely aimless, lacking any sense of purpose and failing to give girls any outlet for their energies and talents, and financially precarious, since its security rested on the father’s continued health and success.⁴⁸³ This economic vulnerability explains both the persistence of this topic as “a constant theme of feminist literature for a long period in the future” and the anxiety of the late Victorian mother to see her daughter safely married.⁴⁸⁴ The realities of growing up the Victorian feminine ideal in mind was evident to the daughters concerned; as Dyhouse notes, “[g]irls learned that they counted for less in the family, and they resented it”.⁴⁸⁵ This conception of the daughter as low in status, dutiful and ideally without any trace of self-assertion permeates Delafield’s characterisations of dependent young women and is reiterated by those mothers in her novels for whom the birth of a daughter is a source of regret and a heavy burden.

Successful feminist campaigning to extend the scope of activities for girls did not lead to greater domestic harmony, however; Dyhouse argues that the “changing provision in girls’ education exacerbated the generational gap between mothers and daughters towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the years preceding the War”, detecting a liberating influence even in the ladylike girls’ schools whose mission was to prepare women for wifehood.⁴⁸⁶ Confining daughters at home, as Delafield’s families usually do, could only lead to difficulties:

It is clear from personal accounts of every kind that women’s experience of living at home as unmarried daughters in the middle-class family was a fertile breeding ground for social tension. It was at this stage that daughters were likely to rebel fiercely against their mothers as role models.⁴⁸⁷

While few of Delafield’s daughter-protagonists could be described as fierce rebels, the drama of her narratives is built around daughters’ resistance to the circumscribed family life enforced by their mothers. In this, she echoes the autobiographical writings of late nineteenth and early twentieth century feminists, who write extensively of their “[t]roubled relationships with mothers” and criticise their mothers for exemplifying a model of femininity that required perpetual deference to male judgement.⁴⁸⁸ Delafield uses the trope of maternal authority and control to create drama out of quests for female autonomy; however, she is attentive to the extent to which young women internalise the rigid behavioural codes set down by their parents. Young women like Monica in *Thank Heaven Fasting* do not overtly rebel against their mothers, but rather fail to be suitably obedient to their rules, rules they have often internalised without critical attention. This attention to the internalisation of patriarchal structures gives Delafield’s novel a subtle means of exploring the

⁴⁸² Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1880-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p30

⁴⁸³ Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, p31

⁴⁸⁴ Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, p32

⁴⁸⁵ Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, p20

⁴⁸⁶ Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, p28

⁴⁸⁷ Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, p27

⁴⁸⁸ Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, p22

impact of patriarchy on the 'good girl', likely to be attractive and acceptable to the conservative middlebrow reader, rather than the possibly less palatable rebel daughter.

Delafield's depictions of daughters chafing under parental restrictions rather than rebelling outright reflects nineteenth-century feminist opinion: Victorian feminists worked within the concept of domestic ideology, arguing for greater rights and opportunities for women in order to help them move closer to the accepted feminine ideal.⁴⁸⁹ Both Josephine Butler and Millicent Fawcett, for example, "asserted their own beliefs in the importance of motherhood and the sanctity of women's domestic role".⁴⁹⁰ Feminists did, however, challenge ideas of parental authority over daughters; as Barbara Caine argues, the role of daughters and their approach to moral autonomy was a unifying topic, since this was "the one situation and relationship which all women shared" and progress in feminist debate and campaigning relied to some extent on the ability of daughters to participate.⁴⁹¹ Delafield's fiction represents both late Victorian feminism's accommodation of traditional gender roles, and its critique of bourgeois limitations of daughterly autonomy. Absorbing both these positions into her fiction allows her both to explore feminist positions within her text, and to maintain literary acceptability for a range of political opinions within her middlebrow readership.

The interwar effort to reinforce traditional gender roles, conducted both by anti-feminist campaigners and as part of a strategic approach by some feminists, had significant implications for the family roles Delafield represents in her fiction. Anxieties about the future of motherhood in a world which offered a greater variety of opportunities to women, and in which women were beginning to have some control over reproduction, were particularly prevalent; motherhood became defined not only as an individual woman's duty to her husband and the fulfilment of a 'natural' gender role, but also a "responsibility to the state itself".⁴⁹² The concept of socially responsible motherhood resulted in campaigns for women to start their families early and to produce at least three babies each.⁴⁹³ Theories of women's position as nurturers of society through civic or social motherhood were also persistent;⁴⁹⁴ feminist writers such as Winifred Holtby asserted the importance of quasi-maternal roles such as babysitting for childless women, and invoked the discourse of maternity to support her argument for women's involvement in public life.⁴⁹⁵ The ideology of motherhood as a profession for middle-class women was reinforced by the marriage bar in many forms of employment,⁴⁹⁶ and by popular magazines: from the inception of *Good*

⁴⁸⁹ Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p114

⁴⁹⁰ Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p50

⁴⁹¹ Caine, *English Feminism*, p105

⁴⁹² Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1999* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000 (2nd edition)), p87

⁴⁹³ Pugh, pp88-89

⁴⁹⁴ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984), p99

⁴⁹⁵ Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1934), pp190-191

⁴⁹⁶ Lewis, p102

Housekeeping in 1922, maternity was promoted to women by emphasising its scientifically defined professional status.⁴⁹⁷

The lives of younger women during the interwar period were enlarged by significantly greater freedom and increased opportunities, in comparison to the generation raised in the Victorian era. Opportunities for women to work, to study, and to move about the world without chaperones generated anxieties for feminists and anti-feminists alike. As Martin Pugh has noted, the “ultra-feminine, shallow-minded flapper” was established as a stereotype of the 1920s younger woman: too free, too masculine in dress, physique and behaviour, and without interest in the serious issues of politics and social reform, or the feminist campaigning underpinning her freedoms.⁴⁹⁸ The interwar daughter could exemplify both attractive and frightening aspects of modernity, not least because there was now an acceptance that middle-class girls would usually be educated at school. School education could confer a greater degree of freedom on young women, as the feminist educationalist Alicia Percival notes, detecting a reduction of authoritarianism in both parents and schoolteachers, with twentieth-century girls permitted “a freedom of thought in politics, religion, and even morals”.⁴⁹⁹ There was also an expectation that middle-class girls would take up some sort of work before marriage,⁵⁰⁰ as well as greater opportunities for girls to enter higher education.⁵⁰¹

Percival suggests that the smaller interwar family would give children “a new and more familiar relationship with the parent, especially the mother”.⁵⁰² While it is undoubtedly true that smaller families did mean that women were not necessarily taken up with the care of successive younger siblings, increased school attendance for girls might actually result in girls spending less rather than more time with their mothers, as well as exposing them to a greater range of female role models. Later historians have detected an ambivalence on the part of interwar daughters towards their mothers; Sally Alexander shows how continued secrecy about sexual matters made it difficult for girls to identify with the “maternal body”, and considers this “one of the driving forces of modernity”.⁵⁰³ An increased separation between mothers and daughters in the interwar period can be seen as replacing outright conflict; this stems from and is reinforced by the characteristics of modern girlhood, in particular greater freedom of thought, movement and opportunities available to girls between the wars. However, marriage was still the expected ultimate destiny for young women, even if it were preceded by an extended education and period of paid employment.

⁴⁹⁷ Pugh, pp83-85

⁴⁹⁸ Pugh, pp73-74

⁴⁹⁹ Alicia C Percival, *The English Miss: Today and Yesterday* (London: George G Harrap, 1939), p307

⁵⁰⁰ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: a Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), p45

⁵⁰¹ Jane Robinson, *Bluestockings: The Remarkable Story of the First Women to Fight for an Education* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), pxxii

⁵⁰² Percival, p310

⁵⁰³ Sally Alexander, ‘The Mysteries and Secrets of Women’s Bodies: Sexual Knowledge in the First Half of the Twentieth Century’ in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* ed. by Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), pp161-175 (p163)

Compared to the Edwardian suffrage campaigners, interwar feminism gave significant attention to motherhood, family life and welfare.⁵⁰⁴ The focus by feminist campaigning groups on the specific needs of women, particularly as mothers, grew partly out of contemporary psychological and sexological thought, which insisted upon sexual difference and on “maternity as the only conceivable occupation for the overwhelming majority of women”.⁵⁰⁵ Feminists such as Maude Royden, who had previously argued strongly that there was no essential difference between men and women, now constructed a “new feminist version of separate spheres for men and women” which insisted on difference and “circumscribed the roles, activities and possibilities for women”.⁵⁰⁶ Feminists, whether out of strategic expedience or genuine conviction, worked within existing social structures in much the same way as their Victorian foremothers.

A particular area of interwar feminist attention was the provision of endowments for mothers taken up in particular by Eleanor Rathbone and the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, who campaigned for family allowances to support a feminist aim of greater financial independence for mothers.⁵⁰⁷ Other feminists, however, argued that while motherhood might be significant in women’s lives, and should be appropriately supported, mothers should still benefit from opportunities to undertake paid work.⁵⁰⁸ By 1934 Winifred Holtby could criticise what she perceived as an excessive valorisation of domesticity and maternity, and suggest that while “there are advantages in a proper respect for maternity [...] they are not adequate to compensate women for a lack of respect for their humanity”.⁵⁰⁹ Vera Brittain’s historical survey *Lady into Woman* characterises motherhood as “an important national service, comparable from the State’s point of view with conscription, which deserved special privileges”.⁵¹⁰ Interwar feminists and anti-feminists alike gave concerned attention to the roles and responsibilities of both mothers and daughters.

As noted above, interwar women writers returned again and again to the late Victorian and Edwardian periods as the historical setting for their dramas of mother-daughter conflict. I argue that, in Delafield’s case, this supports the categorisation of her texts as middlebrow, since the historical setting allows the reader to be both reassured and challenged by the political meaning the texts develop. Delafield’s negative portrayals of dominating late Victorian mothers allow her to explore interwar fears of women’s greater power and agency in an historical and social context which both legitimises the power these mothers use and carefully separates daughters’ stories from the position of contemporary young women. This exploration of anxiety around greater female agency and dominance may reassure the middlebrow reader who is disturbed by arguments for

⁵⁰⁴ Caine, *English Feminism*, p174

⁵⁰⁵ Susan Kingsley Kent, ‘Gender Reconstruction after the First World War’ in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* ed. by Harold L Smith (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990), pp66-83 (p78)

⁵⁰⁶ Kent, pp79-80

⁵⁰⁷ Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p130

⁵⁰⁸ Alberti, pp131-132

⁵⁰⁹ Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, p169

⁵¹⁰ Vera Brittain, *Lady into Woman: a History of Women from Victoria to Elizabeth II* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1953), pp167-168

greater freedom for younger women; Delafield's powerful, controlling mothers suggest an antifeminist characterisation of feminism as an attempt by women to appropriate total power. However, when Delafield distracts the conservative reader from her argument for greater freedom for young women by critiquing the exercise of female maternal power, she runs the risk of compromising her feminist arguments; her mother characters display little awareness of their own oppression, and her feminist argument encompasses only daughters and not mothers.

Delafield's choice of a historical setting for her novels also contributes to their categorisation as feminist and as middlebrow. Like other novels set outside the period of their publication, her fiction occupies "a complex position in relation to the present and the past" and adopts "a dual approach which combines a concern with the past and a concern with the present".⁵¹¹ The historical placing of her novels may create a safe space, in middlebrow terms, to deal with difficult issues. Marianne Hirsch argues that the conventional nineteenth-century mother-daughter plot revolves around

the heroine's singularity based on a disidentification from the fate of other women, especially mothers. In modernist plots, this wish is supplemented by the heroines' artistic ambitions and the desire for distinction which now, however, needs to include affiliations with both male and female models.⁵¹²

Delafield's narratives of daughterly resistance follow the nineteenth-century model as her protagonists seek to separate themselves from their mothers, but many of them also seek agency in determining their sexual futures, a plot development Hirsch identifies with modernist fiction. The historical setting of the text establishes a conservative, middlebrow literary setting with a conventional plot of individuation, in which Delafield can explore more challenging twentieth-century issues such as women's sexual agency.

Motherhood was subject to the intense interest of psychology during the interwar period; newspapers and books mediated simplified models of psychological theories to mothers and those who sought to help or influence them. Freudian models of motherhood characterise the mother "as an obstacle to individual growth, the point of danger, whilst the father will be the place of rescue, of separation and rationality".⁵¹³ E. Ann Kaplan argues that in Freudian psychology, mothers can relate to their children in either an angelic mother position or as the "phallic mother" who seeks to possess the child and its subjectivity.⁵¹⁴ Kaplan argues that both negative types of mother "represent strategies whereby the mother-as-constructed-in-patriarchy attempts to get something for herself in a situation where that is not supposed to happen [...] the phallic mother satisfies

⁵¹¹ Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: the Victorians and Us* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp5-6

⁵¹² Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p10

⁵¹³ Heather Ingman, *Women's Fiction Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p23

⁵¹⁴ Kaplan, p46

needs for power that her ideal function prohibits”.⁵¹⁵ As Freudian theories were disseminated into the public imagination, women psychoanalysts of the period “were transforming Freud’s patriarchal and phallocentric theories”.⁵¹⁶ Helen Deutsch, for example, developed theories that emphasise “the maternal as well as the patriarchal sources of women’s sexuality” and saw “motherhood as women’s culminating task.”⁵¹⁷ Deutsch also rejected an essentialist model of motherhood, asserting that mothering did not mean the same things to all women and that for some women the experience of mothering was emotionally impoverishing.⁵¹⁸ Karen Horney argued that women’s psychology was determined by identification with the mother rather than the father; her work attempted to reposition mothers as a positive factor in developing the subjectivity of their daughters.⁵¹⁹ The comparative absence of such positive representations of mothering in interwar fiction suggests that Horney’s theories had yet to gain wider understanding. Kaplan locates a further development of the phallic mother in Horney’s work: for Horney, women who disliked their traditional feminine role were likely to develop

masculine tendencies [which] may result in the mother desiring to have absolute control over her children [...] such mothers often develop an over-attachment to the daughter [which] may cripple the daughter’s capacity to establish normal relations with men, since she in turn has developed an over attachment to her mother.⁵²⁰

The controlling and powerful mother was, therefore, as much of an anxiety to psychologists as she was to the writers who portrayed her.

Delafield was writing her novels in the context of these developments, all of which insisted on the primacy of the mother in terms of the child’s healthy psychological development, and also reinforced notions of motherhood as women’s normative and primary role. Many of Delafield’s controlling mothers seek to deny their daughters’ subjectivity, and can be read as “phallic” in this model, exercising power through their expectations of total obedience. It should be noted, however, that the upper-class women Delafield depicts would have considered such control an expression of their social duty to obtain the best possible marriage for their daughters, not only securing their daughter’s social and financial stability, but reinforcing their own status and position.⁵²¹ Delafield’s controlling mothers may seem excessive in their domination to the modern and to the interwar reader, but they constitute a mimetic representation of the maternal role in the historical context for her fictions, and therefore form part of the commitment to realism in her fiction that places it in the middlebrow category.

⁵¹⁵ Kaplan, p47

⁵¹⁶ Ingman, p24

⁵¹⁷ Ingman, p24

⁵¹⁸ Ingman, p25

⁵¹⁹ Ingman, p26

⁵²⁰ Kaplan, p109

⁵²¹ Davidoff, p57

Later psychological models have identified a greater identification between mothers and their baby daughters, and a consequent lack of boundaries that can persist into later life;⁵²² girls find themselves caught between preserving maternal closeness and seeking greater autonomy at the risk of maternal rejection.⁵²³ Susan Peck Macdonald detects this paradox as part of the pattern of mothering described in nineteenth-century fiction:

nurturing is withdrawn and replaced by psychological or physical separation so that the daughter can develop her own strength and autonomy. But on the other hand, the mother remains a powerful ideal, and the daughter must, despite or because of their separation, recreate a version of her mother without simply copying her mother.⁵²⁴

Delafield's daughter protagonists are constantly negotiating this space between identification and autonomy, and their negative or ambiguous fates constitute a realistic depiction of the likely outcomes of daughterly rebellion in their time and place. Delafield's realistic and conservative outcomes serve to make her narratives of feminist resistance palatable to the middlebrow reader, while allowing her to critique the impact of patriarchy and its limitations of female autonomy. It should also be noted that Delafield, like May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf, draws heavily on her own personal history in these novels. Articulating personal testimony in this way can be read as a feminist act in itself, and re-presenting a narrative of mother-daughter relationships can expose the negotiations necessary for daughter-authors as well as daughter-protagonists between identification with the mother and the search for autonomy.

Recent critics of the feminine novel of mother-daughter conflict identify it as a twentieth-century innovation; rebellious and independent daughters feature significantly in nineteenth-century women's writing, but generally their rebellion is directed against controlling, patriarchal fathers, with mothers frequently absent or lacking in any influence.⁵²⁵ These are the 'angelic' mothers identified by Kaplan, self-sacrificing, absent or simply dead.⁵²⁶ However, as Heather Ingman notes, there is a large body of interwar women's writing that addresses and criticises

mothers who did try to preserve 'the old order' by, for example, keeping their daughters at home [...] The tensions engendered by unmarried daughters living at home themselves became a breeding ground for a feminist critique. Novel after novel written by women in the interwar period demonstrates sympathy for the dutiful daughter trapped at home and castigates the selfishness of parents who keep her there.⁵²⁷

Ingman reads these critiques of maternal oppression of daughters as statements of women's needs for "interests outside the family if they are to recognise their full potential as human beings" and as

⁵²² Jane Flax, 'The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism' *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 1978, 171-189 (p173)

⁵²³ Flax, p179

⁵²⁴ Susan Peck MacDonald, 'Jane Austen and the Tradition of the Absent Mother' in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* ed. by Cathy N Davidson and E.M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1980), pp58-69 (p67)

⁵²⁵ MacDonald, p58

⁵²⁶ Kaplan, p124

⁵²⁷ Ingman, p8

responses to the prevailing cult of domesticity.⁵²⁸ In Kaplan's model these are the "phallic" mothers, whose stories are

most often narrated from the child's point of view since texts are geared toward moralistic condemnation of the (feared) possessive mother-figure. This can be most easily achieved through focus on the mother's negative impact on the child.⁵²⁹

Ingman views this fictionalisation of the mother-daughter story as permitting "the daughter to seize control and reshape the relationship in a way that suited her needs",⁵³⁰ and demonstrating how "women's self-development is all too easily hampered by other women" as in May Sinclair's *Mary Olivier*, in which "Mrs. Olivier has been able to use the full weight of patriarchal society to justify her opposition to her daughter".⁵³¹ Delafield's Victorian and Edwardian mothers and daughters are from a different class to Mary Olivier, but the requirements of social duty in the service of patriarchal society similarly cause her mothers to seek total control of their daughters and to oppose any hints of individual will.

Delafield's texts are usually written from the daughters' perspective: her young women are among the literary daughters who, as Ingman notes, never realise their mothers as separate subjects or as persons in their own right, or value the contribution of the mother, who is never anything but "a regressive influence, a hindrance to her daughter's fulfilment".⁵³² For Ingman, this negative portrayal of mothers undermines feminist meaning:

So long as the daughter's liberty is bought at the price of denigrating the mother, there will never be any real progress in the mother-daughter relationship; women will be colluding in the patriarchy's wish to weaken women's power by separating daughter from mother.⁵³³

Kaplan identifies in some nineteenth-century texts a third type of mother, the transgressive "resisting" mothers, who "are shown involved in conflicts and contradictions, and as speaking out strongly in defence of what they know to be right".⁵³⁴ Articulating a resisting mother requires the development of maternal subjectivity; while some novels, particularly Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924) and Lettice Cooper's *The New House* (1936), establish a moderate subjectivity and perspective for the maternal character, this does not extend to resisting the demands of patriarchal control over their daughters. Delafield only articulates an extensive maternal subjectivity in one of her novels of mother-daughter conflict, and her mothers never resist patriarchal norms, even when the result of the demands of patriarchy is personally distressing to them. Considering modern abuse memoirs, Kate Douglas suggests that these texts juxtapose a successful adult survivor with the abusive parent because of the "continuing influence of conservative rhetoric demanding clear-cut heroes and

⁵²⁸ Ingman, p 20

⁵²⁹ Kaplan, p124

⁵³⁰ Ingman, p165

⁵³¹ Ingman, p29

⁵³² Ingman, p30

⁵³³ Ingman, p30

⁵³⁴ Kaplan, p128

villains within auto/biographical writing”.⁵³⁵ From this perspective, Delafield’s iterative narratives of patriarchal mothers can be read as supportive of the conservative literary structures of the middlebrow novel, providing similarly “clear-cut heroes and villains”. Her only novel to fully construct a maternal subjectivity, *The Heel of Achilles*, is discussed at length below; even though the novel is written from the mother’s point of view, she is located on the side of the villains rather than that of the heroes.

Nicola Humble has analysed the depiction of the eccentric family in middlebrow fiction, demonstrating how the “family becomes a fundamentally ambivalent space, functioning for its (largely female) members as a source of both creative energies and destructive neuroses, simultaneously a haven and a cage”, and challenging the idea of the family as normative.⁵³⁶ She demonstrates how these eccentric families, through “surreal rereadings” of Victorian intertextual references, critique “Victorian family structures and ideologies [and turn] the traditional family inside out so as to reveal it as a deeply pathological and anti-social structure”.⁵³⁷ Delafield’s Victorian families are the opposite of eccentric: committed to the rigid social code of upper-class Victorian society and determined that their daughters will follow their rules, they are inherently normative. Delafield’s critique is less overt and more subversive, since such families may still hold an aspirational allure for the average middlebrow reader, and the basis of the social code – obey your parents, marry within your class, do not articulate your own sexuality – would still have had meaning and significance in the interwar period. Her novels open up the possibility of middlebrow constructions of normative families that still allow criticism of the family as institution; even though they repress or hide any evidence of deviance, their daughters may still seek greater independence and individuality. However, the normativity of her families combined with a commitment to realism mean that Delafield is unable to construct idealised outcomes for her resistant daughters or to represent resistant mothers supporting their daughters against patriarchal standards; the novels do not function as feminist wish-fulfilment but as a realist critique of the social conditions she herself endured as a young woman.

The two texts considered below also relate to theoretical concepts of gender and performativity. The limited social worlds Delafield describes in her novels manifest and impose a specific set of regulations of which are generated by the late Victorian/Edwardian upper-middle-class subculture her characters inhabit. Delafield’s daughter protagonists in both *The Heel of Achilles* and *Thank Heaven Fasting* attempt to assert and express individual agency, but it is apparent that these expressions are mobilized through identification with the regulations and norms that constrain them. Both Jennie and Monica seek to establish agency in relation to sexuality in order to

⁵³⁵ Kate Douglas, ‘Writing about Abusive Mothers: Ethics and Auto/biography’ in *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures* ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly, (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), pp63-77 (p73)

⁵³⁶ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). p147

⁵³⁷ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p195

love and marry where they choose, rather than to express their sexuality in any different way. This expression of subjectivity by resisting within the boundaries of social norms has some affinity with Judith Butler's model of subjectivity that is, paradoxically, produced by the regulation it seeks to confront:

it is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.⁵³⁸

Aspects of both women's asserted subjectivity – Jennie's physically expressed sexuality and Monica's pursuit of free sexual choice – can be read as emerging productions of the attitudes and regulatory practices of their mothers. Monica in particular demonstrates a performative subjectivity, a discursive practice that cites the regulatory conventions of authority, which give that subject its own authority and conceal that the subject is being constructed through citation rather than agency.⁵³⁹ However, for Delafield, it is the *authentic* self that is produced through the "external opposition to power" that Butler excludes from her definition of agency; Delafield develops notions of a divided self, an inner, authentic self and a performative, inauthentic self which is also at odds with Butler's model of performativity, which does not admit of a divided, inauthentic subject. Even so, Delafield's texts make the reader aware of discursive and regulatory forms and how subjects can be constituted by regulation even and especially while they seek to resist it.

The controlling mother: *The Heel of Achilles*

In this section I consider Delafield's representation of a possessive and controlling mother in *The Heel of Achilles* (1921) and the extent to which this characterisation supports and complicates the text's feminist meaning. I evaluate Delafield's realist approach to the delineation of the mother-daughter relationship as a middlebrow indicator, and also the way in which she makes use of implicit references and allusion to establish a subversive argument about the relationship between feminism and motherhood. *The Heel of Achilles* is the only one of Delafield's novels of Edwardian coming-of-age that considers the mother-daughter relationship from the maternal perspective, and identifies the compromises mothers may be required to make in terms of their own subjectivity. Although the novel is clearly set before the First World War, its feminist arguments relate closely to developments in interwar feminism. My methodological approach will include a close reading of the text and its relation to its historical and literary context, and will also relate the novel to theoretical notions of gender construction.

The novel's protagonist is Lydia Raymond, who is orphaned at the age of twelve and goes to live with her cynical grandfather, kindly Aunt Beryl, and Beryl's brother George, a middle-class family living in a seaside town. Lydia is clever, but also egotistical; she seeks the lion's share of the

⁵³⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), p15

⁵³⁹ Butler, p13

limelight in any situation, but is adept at manipulating circumstances to always give a surface appearance of self-effacement. Her grandfather recognises these characteristics, and gives her various pieces of advice – in particular his golden rule, “always let the other people talk about themselves” – which, when put into practice, shroud her egotism. After a successful period at school, Lydia gets a job in London as accounts clerk at a dress shop, and has an abortive flirtation with a Greek resident at her boarding-house. When he is found to have a wife already, Lydia enjoys the status of being a wronged woman, and turns her experience into a novel, which has a minor success. She moves to a new job as secretary to financier Sir Rupert Honoret, where she first meets a young clergyman, Clement Damerel, who is involved with Sir Rupert’s charitable work. Lydia is inadvertently drawn into Sir Rupert’s covert investigation of his wife, whom he suspects of infidelity. Clement finds Lydia distressed after an interrogation by Sir Rupert, and terrified that she will be called to give evidence in court; he undertakes to help her. Lydia and Clement marry shortly afterwards and move to his family home in Devon, where he will be a curate.

The final third of the novel focuses on Lydia’s relationship with her daughter, Jennie. Lydia and Clement’s marriage is initially happy but then Clement becomes distanced from her, and they have only one child. When Clement dies of appendicitis, after twelve years of marriage, it is the beginning of conflict between mother and daughter, as Lydia resents Jennie’s claims to grief, particularly when they are upheld by others. Jennie grows up to be tomboyish, uninterested in appearance and resentful of her mother’s self-sacrificing tendencies. At seventeen, she meets a Canadian, Roland Valentine, who arrives in their Devon village in his own plane during the summer of 1914; they are immediately attracted to one another and a few weeks later Roland returns to ask for permission to marry Jennie. Lydia objects to the match, ostensibly on the grounds of Jennie’s youth and immaturity, but when war is declared and Roland joins the forces, she is persuaded to allow the marriage to take place. Lydia loves her daughter as she has never really loved anyone, and the trauma of losing her causes her to seek advice from several friends and relatives. Consequently, she is obliged to hear a substantial number of home truths about her egotism and her determination to maintain Jennie’s dependency. Gradually, she comes to realise that her egotism and her need for praise and status has led her to take from her child the opportunities that would have allowed her to mature. The novel closes as Jennie and Roland leave after their wedding, and a distressed Lydia is comforted by her friends and family.

The relationship between Lydia and her daughter is marked with conflict from the outset. Lydia considers her child to be “of the inferior sex”⁵⁴⁰ and lies awake at night wondering “how it would be possible to curb that obstinate self-will of Jennie’s” (336). She is “frightened at certain of her own characteristics reproduced with astonishing vigour in her daughter” (328). Lydia’s subjectivity is essentially a performed one; early training by her grandfather has taught her to suppress her natural inclinations for self-expression, and to play the role that will give her the most

⁵⁴⁰ Delafield, E. M, *The Heel of Achilles: a Novel* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1921), p334. Further references are given in the text in parenthesis.

social power and status in any situation. Her construct of selfhood has also been supported by her personal successes; she has been clever at school, has worked for her living, and has published a novel. The birth of a daughter, rather than a son, challenges her sense of her own agency and competence; she also views her daughter with an intergenerational resentment at the licence she is allowed by others. When Clement becomes ill and dies, Lydia frankly admits to not wanting “childish, noisy grief” in her home, and Jennie is angry and resentful that she was not allowed to say goodbye to her father (338-339). Mother and daughter each resent the other’s behaviour at the time of Clement’s death, and this cements the antipathy between them. Delafield sets up opposition to Lydia’s point of view in the text, usually through the voice of Lydia’s sister-in-law Joyce, who rarely agrees with any of Lydia’s maternal behaviours, and does not hesitate to say so. This critique of Lydia creates ambiguity: Lydia can embody a critique of controlling, infantilising motherhood, but the critique can also be limited to Lydia’s own personality and behaviours, since other women in the text choose to mother differently.

Jennie’s physicality and sexuality are given a degree of attention in the text. Lydia herself does not consider her daughter attractive, but is not overly concerned by this:

Sometimes Lydia wished that her only daughter were pretty; sometimes she felt that beauty would have been such an additional asset to Jennie’s already overweening claims on life that it was almost a relief to know her devoid of it.

She was not, except for a healthy complexion marred by tiny freckles, as good-looking as Lydia was even now. (345)

This attitude to Jennie’s looks typifies Lydia’s relationship with her daughter, in which she is simultaneously loving, possessive, jealous and resentful of her daughter’s claim to a place in the world. It is not shared by other characters in the novel, who praise Jennie’s attractiveness (360). Lydia describes Jennie as a “hoyden” (353); Jennie has a tomboyish lack of interest in dress, is fascinated by aeroplanes and other machinery, and is proud of her “*heaps* of muscle”, displaying a “white, solid forearm” to an enraptured Roland Valentine when they first meet (355-357, emphasis in original). Lydia is unable to recognise that her daughter’s hoydenish qualities are part of what make her attractive to others. Lydia’s views here echo the sentiments of anti-feminist campaigners of the period of the novel, who decried the end of ladylike behaviour among young women.⁵⁴¹ Jennie’s own failure to conform to feminine standards of dress and behaviour can be read both as a form of resistance to her mother’s values, and as an implicit critique of those standards; it also connects her to modern young women of the 1920s, because of the fashionable status of masculine appearance discussed in Chapter 2.

Jennie also symbolises a more overt and passionate sexuality. Lydia herself has “a passionless temperament” and believes that “love should come after marriage if it were to be enduring” (385). Her own marriage seems to have quickly become a *mariage blanc*; the narrative states that “Clement had ceased to make any demands upon her”, and although this is expressed in

⁵⁴¹ Caine, *English Feminism*, p135

the context of their emotional relationship, the lack of further children also suggests that Lydia's passionlessness has had its effect (329). Lydia has "vague suspicions" that Jennie possesses "other, more volcanic forces", suggesting a fear of the power of her daughter's sexuality (385); this is underlined by her efforts to convince herself that Jennie is not attractive, as this would render her altogether too powerful. Lydia's realisation that Jennie has been out walking with Roland Valentine – "her face was flushed and her eyes shining like stars" (365) – forces her to confront the possibility of her daughter's sexuality, but this reinforces her view of her status within Jennie's life as one who must protect her daughter: "*Jennie* could not take care of herself – little *Jennie*!" (369, emphasis in original). At other points in the text, Lydia is insistent that she could have married again had she not chosen to devote herself to Jennie (436). Delafield implies both that Lydia believes herself to have sacrificed her own sexuality to her daughter's wellbeing, and that Lydia resents the possibility of being supplanted by Jennie as the potential recipient of male sexual attention, attention being the central foundation of Lydia's own sense of self. Lydia's views of correct behaviour in courtship in her later life are conservative, and in a middlebrow text they function as a realist device, balanced against the potential radicalism of Jennie's claims for sexual self-expression. Jennie's position in the text as a body as well as a subject can be seen as a product of Lydia's parenting. Lydia's regulatory practice seeks to constitute a physically weak, highly dependent daughter, the model of Edwardian femininity; using Butler's model, Jennie's resistance against this regulation emerges through her tomboyish behaviour and slightly masculine appearance, but also within this regulation, because it is precisely these aspects of her body that make her sexually successful and able to fulfil her destined role as an Edwardian girl, to become married.

Lydia's determinedly self-sacrificing style of motherhood, through which she seeks to show herself as praiseworthy and admirable to her peers, is criticised throughout the text and shown as the foundation of her difficult relationship with Jennie. Lydia's wish to care for her daughter is experienced as infantilising and controlling by Jennie, who resists it. Lydia in turn resents her resistance: "If only Jennie would have been a meek and delicate child, allowing her mother to wait upon her, how gladly Lydia would have displayed her unselfish devotion!" (353) The key word in this sentence is *displayed*: Delafield is reminding us that Lydia's sense of self must be continually supported by a performance of perfect behaviour that is appreciated by those around her. But Jennie will not co-operate with Lydia's need for self-sacrifice:

[Lydia] would have liked so much to pet Jennie, and make a baby of her, and know her to be dependent on her mother for everything! [...] But Jennie had, from an obstinate, rather inarticulate, and backward child, slowly developed into a self-sufficient, self-assertive girl, asking only to go her own way, and perfectly satisfied with her own crude efficiency. (354)

Lydia repeatedly compares Jennie, always unfavourably, to her own, competent, younger self, but Delafield makes it explicit that Lydia welcomes Jennie's lack of ability and skill because she hopes this will maintain her dependence and provide greater opportunity for Lydia's self-sacrifice:

Jennie was in no danger of displaying the efficiency that had been Lydia's at nineteen. She was very clumsy with her fingers [...] although she was not stupid, a certain slowness of

development and inability to express herself very often made her appear so. She could neither sew nor write with any facility [...] These deficiencies should have made her very dependent upon Lydia, and the services that Lydia was only too ready to devote to her, but, then, Jennie did not like being served, although she would not take the steps towards learning such independence as might be conceded to a daughter in her mother's house. (376)

Delafield's tone is ironic and suggests that the independence that might be learned by Jennie "in her mother's house" may well be so limited as not to be worth learning. Lydia also resists any attempt by Jennie to care for her in return: "She always disliked any display of thoughtfulness or anxiety on her behalf from Jennie. It seemed somehow to minimise her own self-abnegating maternity, and to assert on Jennie's part an unfounded claim to maturity" (466). Jennie, Delafield suggests, cannot achieve independence through acquiring competence, or through attempting to show her own feminine maturity through kindness and consideration: Lydia's need for control and self-sacrifice will defeat both these approaches. Jennie can achieve liberation only through resistance and rebellion. In a muted way, Delafield is asserting the need for a militant approach to self-determination by daughters in Jennie's position. Consequently, she shows Jennie maintaining a sulky ingratitude in the face of Lydia's constant ministrations; any public manifestation of Lydia's care for her daughter is rejected. Lydia, perhaps over-solicitous, tries to see if the hem of Jennie's dress is wet after she has been walking in the garden with Roland Valentine, but "in her usual ungracious fashion the girl twitched herself away" (364). Later, they quarrel over whether Lydia, or her maid, should pack Jennie's overnight case, with Jennie "outspokenly defiant of Lydia's tenderness" and Lydia asserting that Jennie is "a silly little thing" (366).

Lydia has had an idea that Jennie's future husband "must be a man who would recognise her foolish rebellion against her mother's love for what it was – the ill-regulated ebullitions of a youthfulness that was wholly unfitted for the independence that it craved" (368). In fact Roland supports Jennie's rejection of Lydia's ostentatious sacrifices, suggesting that they spoil the fun of the person for whom they are made because "gratitude is such a beastly feeling" (382). He also confronts Lydia for having "made Jennie a good deal afraid of [her]" (391), and attempts to make Lydia understand that "Jennie very much resents [...] your doing everything for her. I guess she feels it just about time she shouldered some responsibility for herself." (396) He compares Jennie's education to that of Canadian girls, who are routinely sent to school and support themselves before marriage, and suggests that Lydia is refusing Jennie "the natural right of the individual – the right of experience" (397). Delafield puts the feminist argument for Jennie's greater liberty in the mouth of her foreign suitor; this emphasises the alien nature of these ideas for Lydia, but also shows a young man co-opting feminist arguments to support Jennie's entry into an early marriage. This exchange can be read as a subversive critique of feminist arguments that worked within existing ideologies of marriage and gender role. But Roland himself is an ambiguous figure. He can be read as definitively and disruptively modern, flying his own plane and admiring Jennie's unfeminine ways; and he is also a traditionally romantic figure, rescuing Jennie from her mother and volunteering without

hesitation for war service so that, for the 1921 reader, he can be clearly associated with war heroism and with the normative. This ambiguity typifies Delafield's expression of radical meaning in the novel; Roland makes explicit feminist arguments but his ambiguous status mitigates the impact of any subversion he suggests.

Delafield shows Jennie's rebellious determination, backed up by Roland and by family and friends, as eventually successful, a tacit endorsement of Jennie's ways of both managing and confronting a controlling mother. The ultimate breach between mother and daughter, however, is not caused by Jennie's choice of husband but by her refusal to stay on in Devon after the marriage, intending instead to live in London and undertake war-work. The argument about this is partly provoked by Lydia, who pushes Jennie to confess the full extent of her antipathy: "You'd rather live by yourself in London, in fact, and cope with difficulties, whilst I stay alone down here, than let us be together during these miserable times of anxiety [...]. What you're really saying is that you don't want me to have anything to do with your new life." (455) Jennie's demeanour during this quarrel is at first "unconsciously beseeching" but Lydia's "iron" voice and determined condemnation of Jennie's plans change her expression into one of "sullen self-justification" (456) and she attempts to assert herself:

I *can't* stay always tied to your apron strings [...] I've got to develop into a responsible grown-up person *some* time or another, I suppose – and how can I ever do it when all the time you're shielding me from everything, and only wanting me to be, as you say, good and happy – like a little baby? [...] I've been thinking it, and feeling it, for years. And I've been miserable at home. (456-457, emphasis in original)

This exchange opens up an "abyss" between the two women, and although Jennie bursts into tears and attempts to take back what she has said, the damage has been done (457). Delafield seeks to describe the relationship between Jennie and Lydia even-handedly; the narrative insists on the genuine, if misdirected, love that Lydia has for her daughter, and it also upholds some of her criticisms of Jennie, who can be naive and immature, although the blame for this is usually attributed to Lydia. Some of Lydia's opposition to Jennie's marriage, the text implies, arises from her concerns about her own class origins, markedly lower than those of her husband's family, concerns which were reasonable in her social context; her anxieties around Jennie's expression of her sexuality may also stem from this, since, as discussed above, Jennie's femininity is a marker of her own, and of Lydia's, social respectability (408). Similarly, the climactic confrontation between the two women does not lead to an unrealistic reconciliation but instead reinforces their separateness and their understanding of that separateness. Delafield's representation of this sundering of mother and daughter echoes psychological notions of the need for daughters to separate from their mothers in order to establish their own subjectivity. But the text's insistence on the physical pain and suffering that Lydia must undergo also evokes the pain of childbirth, as if Lydia is reliving that earlier separation of mother and child.

Roland's criticisms, for example, cause Lydia "the sharpest pain that she had ever known" but he points out to her that letting Jennie go will only be "another kind of sacrifice" by watching

her “take her own risks and shoulder her own responsibilities” (397-398). Her sister-in-law Joyce calls Lydia a “monstrous egoist” who lacks any self-knowledge: “it isn’t Jennie you love at all – it’s yourself” (412-413). When Aunt Beryl, who Lydia hoped would support her viewpoint, gently suggests that Lydia needs to let Jennie go, “[Lydia] felt as though something within her were being killed by agonised inches. Something that would not die. If once it died the suffering would be over, and she herself left shattered, no longer keenly sentient.” (451) Lydia cannot let go of her need for attention and appreciation for her sacrifices. When Lydia has suffered in the past, “the pity, and the pride, and the sympathy made up for all the pain and privation” (451). But the suffering she undergoes as she is forced to recognise Jennie’s autonomy cannot be exploited for public sympathy in the same way as, for example, the death of her husband or the birth of her daughter. To reinforce the sense of pain and anguish suffered by Lydia, her final advice in the novel comes from the old Rector, who, referring to the Virgin Mary, asserts that enduring suffering on behalf of the beloved is only a “stage of love [...] Beyond that there is a greater immolation. That of relinquishing the privilege of suffering to another, and accepting the pain of watching that suffering.” (474) Like Roland Valentine, the Rector is an ambiguous figure in the novel. In this scene, he uses a “dreamy, monotonous voice” to impart his suggestions to Lydia, which gives a sense of his spiritual status beyond this world; elsewhere in the text, however, he is described by Lydia as “simple-minded” (423). His valorisation of maternal sacrifice can therefore both be read as supported by the text, as it is accepted by Lydia, and as old-fashioned and conservative, forming part of the text’s critique of self-abnegating maternity.

To acknowledge Jennie’s separate, individual subjectivity challenges Lydia’s own sense of self, because that self is constructed from the admiration of others. Lydia comes, eventually, to agree: “Jennie was the first person whom Lydia had loved, and [...] she had not known how to set about it [...] she had] taken all the greater things for herself, and left Jennie only the less” (423). She undergoes a traumatic acknowledgement of Jennie’s subjectivity: “Now, she was slowly, and with infinite pain in the recognition, forced to concede to Jennie the existence of a definite and individual personality – Jennie the potential woman, as distinct from Jennie, Lydia Damerel’s child” (426). Lydia finally realises that she must, as the Rector advises, let Jennie have “the foreground tomorrow. Let hers be the bravery, and the sacrifice, and the sorrow, and the gladness” (475). Delafield’s narrative develops in parallel the story of Jennie’s struggle to assert her subjectivity, and Lydia’s realisation that her own sense of self must now be transformed:

[Lydia] generally had succeeded [...] She had made people like and admire her, she had profited to the full of educational advantages, she had found work and successfully achieved it, had extricated herself unscarred and unblemished from various minor encounters, had made a marriage such as might well have seemed unattainable [...] and, even greater achievement, had adequately filled the place open to her by that marriage. The record was to end there, it seemed. (478)

Delafield's realistic conclusion leaves mother and daughter at odds with each other, if not actually estranged, and leaves Lydia to face the consequences of her resentment of her daughter and the apparent end of her successful pursuit of life's opportunities.

Lydia's trajectory, from smart opportunist to empty nest, symbolises a progression from radicalism to conservatism and can be read as an analogy of some variants of feminist thought. Like Lydia herself as a young woman, feminist politics disrupted the ideology of separate spheres for men and women, promoting opportunities for women to study and to work. But Lydia, after her marriage, begins to enforce accepted gender roles rigorously, for herself and her daughter. Some interwar feminists argued for a new type of separate spheres feminism, in which women's separate and different needs, particularly those of mothers, were acknowledged and supported. Lydia's story could stand for the implications of replacing equality feminism with new feminism, and of the potential enforcement of the maternal role on all women. Delafield makes an overt feminist argument in this text for greater opportunities for women, tapping into the widely shared feminist support for more autonomy for daughters, but also makes an implicit argument about the impact of contemporary strands within feminism.

However, this dual argument is complicated by Lydia's almost anti-heroic status. Despite her energy, ability and personal success, she is difficult to cast as a feminist heroine, because she is often manipulative and makes no common cause with the women around her. She can also stand as a warning of the effect of education and work outside the home on women, especially when they later become mothers. Anti-feminist rhetoric drew extensively on fears that disrupted gender roles would unsex women and render them unfit for maternity. Lydia is consistently characterised as an unsuccessful mother, and this is perceived to varying degrees by all the other characters. It is possible to read the text as a critique of a maternal ideology that requires total self-sacrifice of mothers, and total dependency of daughters; it is also possible to read it as a criticism of ambitious women who wish to make their own way in the world and become unsuitable for motherhood as a result. These oppositional readings are kept in play in the narrative so that the narrative remains palatable both to conservative and more radical readers of the middlebrow novel.

Dominated daughters: *Thank Heaven Fasting*

Delafield's mid-career novel is also set in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods but within a very different, and considerably more rigid, social structure. While Lydia moves flexibly through the middle classes, coming eventually to rest in the rural gentry, Monica in *Thank Heaven Fasting* is confined within a particularly narrow section of upper-class society, meeting nobody that her mother does not already know. In this section I consider how Delafield demonstrates how this social environment constrains the development of subjectivity in its young women, and the explicit feminist argument established by the text. However, I also argue that Delafield's use of irony and

her maintenance of realism in the text complicate and in part efface the radicalism of her particular argument, and make the text more acceptable to the middlebrow reader.

The narrative opens when eighteen-year-old Monica Ingram, brought up very strictly by her mother to view making a good marriage as her sole aim in life, comes out into London society. Monica is pretty and is popular during her first season, but is taken in by the flirtatious Captain Christopher Lane. Her mother tells her to have nothing to do with him, but Monica disobeys. After a week-long romance involving exciting secret assignations, Monica naively believes they are in love, and agrees to 'sit out' with him in the roof garden at a ball, where he kisses her. Monica's mother is appalled and dismayed at her behaviour, and does what she can to prevent the story getting out, but Monica's reputation is sullied, she becomes less popular, and loses her attractiveness.

In her early twenties, Monica meets handsome Carol Anderson at a wedding, and they become friendly, but it soon becomes clear that Carol only wants Monica as a confidante; he is in love with a married woman. Monica is friendly with two other young women, Frederica and Cecily Marlowe, who have been equally unsuccessful on the marriage market; Frederica claims to hate men, and is anxiously possessive of Cecily. Their mother, Lady Marlowe, is openly scathing about their marriage prospects. When Lady Marlowe and Frederica become ill, the young doctor who treats them advises Lady Marlowe that the sisters should be separated, for their own good, but she dismisses this advice. He later proposes marriage to Cecily, who accepts him but then breaks off the engagement after Frederica has an hysterical breakdown. Lady Marlowe arranges for an allowance to be paid to her daughters and sends them to live in the country. Monica's father is run over by a cab, and subsequently dies. Her mother leans heavily on Monica for emotional support. Monica, realising that Carol Anderson will never marry her, accepts the proposal of an old family friend, Mr Pelham, partly to escape from the aimless existence she is leading with her mother. The novel closes with their marriage.

Delafield's characterisation of the mother-daughter relationship in *Thank Heaven Fasting* is more complex and more ironised than the simpler, oppositional relationship between Lydia and Jennie in *The Heel of Achilles*. Mrs. Ingram is indeed controlling, and her regulation of Monica's behaviour limits Monica's opportunities to express her own subjectivity and be fully recognised as a separate individual. Monica's world is

full of young girls who were all being good [...] since opportunities for being anything else were practically non-existent. One was safeguarded. One's religion, one's mother, one's maid ... But especially one's mother. Monica's mother was even more of a safeguard than most, for she was very particular.⁵⁴²

It is the lack of opportunity or scope for "being anything else" that is reinforced by the narrative; Monica's function within her family is to support its social status by being attractive but well-

⁵⁴² Delafield, E.M., *Thank Heaven Fasting* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1988 (1932)), p9, second ellipsis in original. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

behaved and finding a suitable husband. Mrs. Ingram's particular standards ensure that Monica internalises her regulations for correct behaviour, all designed to support Monica's successful negotiation of the marriage market:

Never fall in love with a man who isn't quite, *quite* [...] Never make yourself cheap, darling. It doesn't lead to anything, in the long run, to let a man know that you like him [...] Don't talk about being 'friends' with a young man [...] there's no such thing as friendship between a girl and a man. Either he wants to marry you, or he doesn't. Nothing else is any good. A girl who gets herself talked about is done for. Men may dance with her, or flirt with her, but they don't propose [...] Never have anything to do with a young man who's familiar. (10-11)

These regulations are specific, but sometimes ambiguous: terms such as "cheap", "familiar" and "quite, *quite*" all have a relative meaning that might be effaced or displaced by circumstances. Many of Mrs. Ingram's regulations relate to posture and gesture, and Delafield's stress on this aspect both underlines the way in which Monica has internalised them and the way in which they seek to impede her bodily subjectivity. In company, Monica is stiff and unnatural, assuming an "entirely new and artificial expression [...] Monica put her shoulders back and raised her chin, the echo of countless adjurations to 'hold up' returning automatically to her mind, as it always did in the presence of her parents" (19). Delafield, by showing Monica's automatic bodily response to the regulations of her mother, emphasises her physical internalisation of these regulations and the way these regulations attempt to ensure that her body is not her own. However, Delafield also suggests that although Monica has internalised these values, they have lost impact and meaning for her: "Monica had heard these and similar maxims so very often that she had long ceased to pay conscious attention to them, and merely accepted them as being amongst the fundamentals of life." (12) This lack of "conscious attention" implies that Monica's conscious mind may be taken up with her own ideas rather than her mother's views.

The assertion of subjectivity through the expression of her own thoughts is, however, generally denied to Monica. Mrs. Ingram's rules and her application of them make it fundamentally impossible for Monica to assert her own opinion: "Monica still remembered how, at fifteen, she had tried to argue [a] point, and her mother had said very quietly: 'Darling, who knows best – you or mother?'" (15) Monica has been drilled to offer the appropriate opinion in the right social context. Among her peers, Monica can show some backbone, as when she criticises Frederica's possessive attitude to Cecily: "The way you fuss, Fricky! It's absurd. I can't think why Cecily stands it. She ought to tell you to mind your own business. She's old enough to look after herself." (19) However, when talking to the possibly eligible Mr Pelham, Monica becomes artificial, expressing admiration of certain paintings because she knows "that this was the right thing to say" (21). Delafield emphasises Monica's lack of agency and ability to form her own, separate opinions, contrasting her with Cecily, who is "nearly capable of thinking for herself independently" but too frightened of Frederica to express her thoughts (149). However, Monica is capable of thinking her own thoughts, if not of expressing them; when an early admirer is dismissed by her mother as not

“very much use” because of his financial position, Monica is “disconcerted and disappointed [but] did not quite know how to reply. She was afraid that her mother was going to say that she would not be allowed to be friends with Claude Ashe any more” (61). Delafield implies here that Monica’s fear of her mother withdrawing the little personal freedom that she has is the key factor in her constrained self-expression.

Monica’s adult subjectivity is further denied by Mrs. Ingram’s persistent infantilisation of her daughter, both through affection and tenderness and through her regulation of her daughter’s every move. Monica recognises this but feels unable to counter it:

She did wish that her mother would not talk to her as though she were still a child. Once, she had ventured to say so, in a moment of intimacy, and Mrs. Ingram had kissed her, and answered gently: ‘To me, you can never be anything but my baby, even if you live to be a hundred.’ To the irrational tenderness of such a declaration, no dutiful and affectionate daughter could make any reply. (25)

Access to reading material, from a selection already edited for respectability by a circulating library, is also managed by her mother: “She was allowed, now, to read the books from Mudie’s in the drawing-room, provided that she asked her mother’s leave first, as to each one.” (26) When Monica does attempt modest self-expression, ironically through insisting on displaying a portrait of the Emperor Napoleon in her bedroom, her mother dismisses it as part of “a phase, darling”; however, Monica does not dare to take down the “reproduction of the Sistine Madonna” that hangs over the bed: “she had never found courage to do anything so entirely likely to lead to disaster [...] she would never have been allowed to take down the Madonna and Child” (26). As in *The Heel of Achilles*, Delafield ironises a controlling mother through a reference to the self-abnegating maternity of the Virgin Mary, but through this same device reinforces the message that Monica’s subjectivity is circumscribed; her mother even controls the representation of motherhood that Monica sees every day.

Delafield opens up the possibility of hostility between mother and daughter in the statement “Monica believed herself to love her mother better than anybody else” (29). This is part of a construction of Monica, explored further below, as essentially performing a role rather than expressing herself as a subject. By suggesting that Monica believes herself to love her mother, Delafield also suggests that in fact there is less love between them than might be expected. She also demonstrates that Monica is aware of a suppressed hostility to her mother: “Monica had very often been told that Mrs. Ingram had married at eighteen, and the information always vaguely annoyed her. ‘I suppose you must have been very pretty when you were young,’ she said politely, trying not to know too consciously that she was saying something very nasty indeed.” (62) When Monica openly contradicts her mother, even over trivial things, her mother asserts her authority with calm effectiveness:

‘You want another hairpin – just *there*.’

‘Oh, mother, please let me put it in for myself,’ cried Monica impatiently.

‘No, darling. You can’t possibly tell where it’s needed. Bend your head down.’

Monica had to obey. (36)

Through this exchange, and a later scene in which Monica’s request to remain standing receives the response “Mother said Sit down, Monica”, Delafield reinforces Mrs. Ingram’s attempt to control her daughter’s body, to keep her in a physically abject position, and to ensure that she has authority not only over Monica’s mental processes but over her physical ones as well (87). Monica’s submissiveness to her mother is balanced against her timid attempts at self-assertion; Delafield is setting the scene for the crisis that will result from Monica’s flirtation with Christopher Lane, during which her mother’s sustained suppression of any sense of self within her daughter will become part of the problem.

When Monica first meets Captain Lane, he is the very embodiment of familiar, putting his arm around her waist when they ride on a water chute. The excited Monica – despite endless instruction from her mother and consideration of what her mother would do – is not equal to the situation:

Monica had not the least idea what she ought to say. Instinctively, she referred everything, as she had been taught to do from babyhood, to the bar of her mother’s judgement, and she knew, of course, that her mother would say that Captain Lane was behaving like a cad, and that Monica must instantly make it clear to him that she was Not that Kind of Girl.

Monica did not, however, know how to do this.

Worse still, she did not want to do it. (70)

Monica’s sexual response to Lane is indicated in the text: “pleasure and wild excitement predominated over every other sensation” (72). It is this response that makes her ignore the well-learned strictures of her mother, but she is also following her mother’s basic instruction, to prove herself attractive to men. Monica constantly evaluates her attractiveness against that of other young women around her – at the start of the trip to the funfair, she considers that “although one hardly liked to even think of such a thing, [...] she herself were the prettiest girl there” (66). Her mother’s instructions have taught her that her sexual attractiveness is her only value; her mother’s suppression of her subjectivity has made it impossible for her to assert herself to enforce her mother’s rules and to have a sense of her ownership of her own body. They have created, instead, a superficial construct of a young lady who is performing the role of a girl attracting a young man. Reading this episode in the context of Butler’s theories of performativity gives further emphasis to Delafield’s critique. Monica’s escapade with Lane is essentially performative because, although transgressive, it is situated within and constructed by the “constraint [...] which impels and sustains performativity”.⁵⁴³ Monica is performing the role for which she has been prepared, and her relations with Lane involve her reiterating the set of social norms that underpin her mother’s regulatory practice: to be attractive to marriageable men. Like Jennie, she does not break her

⁵⁴³ Butler, p95

mother's rules; her transgression is defined by these rules and performed within their constraints. The text reveals an idea of the performative subject which helps us understand the limitations of agency and subjectivity that can be established within Monica's social and familial context. In the end, Monica's attraction to Lane does not constitute a sustained rebellion and once out of his company, Monica's adherence to her mother's rules reasserts itself:

She was not at all certain that she wanted him to kiss her again. For one thing, it troubled her conscience very much indeed. She could almost hear her mother's voice, saying that no young man every respected a girl who made herself cheap. No young man ever wanted such a girl to marry him. He merely despised her. (80)

When Mrs. Ingram asks Monica to drop Lane, on the grounds of his unsuitability, Monica responds with "a violent fit of crying" in her bedroom and makes up "speeches – defiant, courageous and yet reasonable speeches – that would force her parents to see once and for all that she had no intention of giving up Christopher whatever *anybody* might say" (88-89). Delafield emphasises the superficiality of Monica's feelings and of her potential rebellion by suggesting that Monica is telling herself a "confused, fantastic story of which she herself was the heroine" and by noting Monica's "satisfaction that her tears had made an enormous wet patch on the pillow" (89). Monica often feels like "a girl in a book" when she is with Captain Lane, and Delafield's representation of her as performing young ladyhood draws attention to her lack of subjectivity (83). However, Delafield also makes it explicit that Lane is a very poor choice of love-object for Monica; as Monica herself comes eventually to realise, he is a "cad [...] taking advantage of a girl who had made herself cheap" (115). Like the socially and morally dubious Queenie in *Consequences*, as discussed in Chapter 2, Lane reminds the reader that young girls, if allowed to bestow their affections without parental control, may choose badly. Monica's mistake over Lane can be read as supportive of the constraints her mother attempts to place on her.

The superficiality of her self-construction as a thwarted girl in love is emphasised by her reaction when Lane does not respond to her letter explaining that her mother has required her to drop him: "The realisation that he had not answered her appeal caused her far greater and more real suffering than the unhappiness she had felt at being told she was to have nothing more to do with him. *That* unhappiness, she knew now, had been alleviated by the consciousness of persecution, and the sense of being the heroine of a romance" (93). Delafield shows both the shallowness of Monica's feelings and her limited self-awareness that is only occasionally able to emerge. Monica's effort towards self-knowledge is extinguished when Lane discards her and she realises that "*Her mother had been right all the time*. It was a conviction from which she was never again wholly to free herself" (115, emphasis in original). This crisis destroys any nascent self-assertion and self-confidence within Monica, even that self-confidence based on her ability to perform the role ascribed to her by attracting men; it also increases Mrs. Ingram's power over the newly vulnerable Monica, and weakens the boundaries between mother and daughter.

During the middle section of the novel, subtitled 'The Anxious Years', Monica is represented as having completely internalised her mother's values. The shock and upset of the Christopher Lane affair have altered her looks: she is "not as pretty as she had been at eighteen. Her face was certainly paler and much thinner, and the loss of a tooth showed a gap when she smiled" (128). Monica considers herself "not, any longer, attractive" and she and her mother are consumed by a "secret, gnawing anxiety" that she will never marry (117-118). This anxiety, added to her conviction that her mother was right about Lane, makes it even more difficult for Monica to exist as a subject; her ambitions and desires have become fused with her mother's. When Carol Anderson begins to pay Monica attention, she knows "as well as if she had been told so, that the mother was quivering with anxiety and with a hope that she hardly ventured to acknowledge, even to herself" (132). The two women share this anxiety but cannot discuss it: "It was very seldom indeed that they came as near as they had to a direct mention of the subject that was always present in the minds of both" (156).

This emotional fusion with her mother has a number of effects. Monica begins to adhere to her mother's rules much more strictly, even when, as with Carol Anderson, she is conscious that this will make their friendship essentially superficial:

She wanted to say much more – to tell him that she cared deeply for his friendship, that she wanted him to tell her everything about himself, and to give him her confidence in return – but she was inhibited by her own emotion, her abiding sense of insecurity, and the ever-present recollection of her mother's reiterated warnings. (134)

These inhibitions are real and genuinely felt, but to some extent Monica is also aware that she is playing a role. Delafield shows how Monica continues to sustain a performative self that has, in some ways, become the means by which she is sincere:

Monica believed, at least partially, in the truth of what she was saying. Her life would have been so utterly unendurable had she not been able to believe something of the kind, that this legend of her own fidelity had crystallised within her by imperceptible degrees, and had become part of the fabric of existence. She offered it to Carol Anderson without any sense of being other than wholly sincere [...] She knew that was what he wanted her to say, and it would have been impossible to Monica to risk losing his evident confidence in her sympathy. Far below the regions of conscious thought was the hope that from friendship and sympathy might spring sexual desire. (140-141)

Monica is so intent on preserving Carol's potential interest that she cannot articulate her real feelings; when she asserts that she is not disappointed with the one-sided friendship he offers, "[i]t did not even occur to her for a moment that she was, actually, speaking an untruth. Her only preoccupation was the ingrained one: not to run any risk of losing her hold, however tenuous, on the interest on an unmarried male" (157). Monica's "frail self-respect" cannot be supported by the assertion of herself as a separate subject, but only by fulfilling the role for which she has been schooled, and continuing to attract suitable men (157). However, Delafield shows that Monica is aware that Carol is unsatisfactory: "she was forced to admit that very often he chilled and disappointed her. It was evident that he would always take everything, and give very little in return"

(181). Delafield shows both the performed Monica, who Monica herself believes strongly to be sincere, and Monica's authentic self, which recognises a disappointment for what it is; but she also shows how the conditions of Monica's life and in particular her relationship with her mother make it impossible for her to express this authentic self.

Monica's engagement to kindly, dull Mr Pelham, with his "earnest, prawn-like eyes" resolves the two dramas of the novel (210). Monica is "happier than she had every thought to be, since the far-off days of her unshattered, youthful confidence. For the first time since her foolish love-affair with Christopher Lane, Monica had regained her self-respect." (210) Mrs. Ingram is relieved of the stigma of an unmarried daughter: "Nothing in the world could make me happier than to see you married to a good man [...] I couldn't, *couldn't* have borne to see you an old maid." (221) Both Monica and her mother studiously ignore the fact that Monica is not in any way attracted to Mr Pelham. He is "heavily built" and has "thinning dark hair" (20); Monica finds him "dull" at first (49). By the end of the novel, however, Monica is so desperate to be married that she cannot actually perceive her feelings about him: "She was not in the least preoccupied with any consideration as to whether or not she thought Mr Pelham nice" (208). His first kiss "neither pleased nor displeased her" (210) and the quality she seems to value in him most is his reliability (219). At her wedding, Monica realises with joy that she is "to have a life of her own, after all" (222). A married woman, Monica finds herself "licensed to criticise her seniors in a hitherto unprecedented manner" (220). Monica's sudden shift from unimportant young girl to engaged woman whose opinions are of value allows Delafield to criticise a society that valorises marriage above all things. Monica's opinions have not changed; her view of Lady Marlowe's treatment of her daughters, for example, is consistent throughout the novel. But only marriage can give her a voice that is audible to her parents' generation. Her marriage reinforces Delafield's critique of a social milieu that permits no other route to subjectivity for women than marriage, and also allows Delafield to ironise that route; Monica, married to a man she does not love and would not have chosen unless out of desperation, is committed to sustaining her performative self. But Monica thinks of herself as "safe for ever" because of her marriage (222); life as an authentic subject is perhaps too dangerous for her to attempt.

Delafield's critique of Mrs. Ingram's control of her daughter is mitigated by the sub-plot concerning Lady Marlowe and her daughters. Mrs. Ingram may be authoritarian, but the narrative shows her as relatively kind and liberal compared to Lady Marlowe. Delafield is explicit about the greater liberty allowed to Monica in comparison with the Marlowes:

Monica's mother was, comparatively, liberal-minded. She allowed her child to go out to matinées with only another girl, and to walk in the streets of Belgravia – *not* the Pimlico end, and not beyond Harvey Nicholls at the top of Sloane Street – escorted only by a maid. Monica might go in cabs, even hansoms, although not in omnibuses, and she might travel, alone by train, first-class, if her mother's maid went with her.

Frederica and Cecily Marlowe, especially Frederica, envied Monica her emancipation.

They had no freedom at all. (52)

Delafield's ironic representation of Monica's extremely limited "emancipation" – she may move about alone, provided she has a maid with her – performs a number of functions. It demonstrates that even parents who can be considered liberal in attitude may yet be constraining the lives of their daughters; it sharpens the contrast between Monica's repressed, yet bearable existence, and the unhealthy, secluded life lived by the Marlowe daughters; but it also establishes a continuum between "liberal-minded" Mrs. Ingram and Lady Marlowe's domination: "Their mother's authority was supreme. No one in the house was allowed to question it, but Frederica and Cecily least of all. If Frederica sometimes [...] made occasional clumsy and defiant attempts at self-assertion, they were met with such open ridicule that she could not persist in them" (56). The result of this is incipient mental disturbance in both sisters, from "an immense and unacknowledged sense of guilt [...] since both practiced continual deceptions, ranging from direct lies to subtle reservations and implications, in regard to one another and to their parent. They were never, indeed, frank with anyone" (57). Neither daughter is able to assert herself as a subject; instead, their personalities are constructed to satisfy superficially their mother's commands and requirements. In this respect they function as more extreme versions of Monica, who is at least able to construct a performative self that has some relation to her inner self as presented in the text.

Lady Marlowe is not, the text makes plain, a good mother of daughters. Like Lydia Damerel, she is disappointed not to have sons, and regards her daughters' sex "as something between a disgrace and a calamity"; when they fail to attract men she jeers at them "lightly and amusingly" in front of her friends (53). Her daughters are physically awkward: both are

very tall and stooped badly, both had curious dark shadows beneath their eyes, lax mouths that drooped a little, and long, pale, inefficient hands. Neither was every wholly natural or free from self-consciousness [...] they achieved a semblance of ease with Monica, provided always that their dominating and intensely vital mother was not present (17).

Frederica and Cecily are always presented as physically and mentally unhealthy, while Lady Marlowe is almost vampiric, a woman draining the youth and vitality from her daughters: "Lady Marlowe, witty and vivacious, still handsome, attracted men" (19).

Frederica becomes controlling and possessive of her sister, seeking always to prevent her from asserting herself:

She could not even bear to let Cecily read a novel that might bring her into vicarious contact with life. It might mean that she would be hurt. It might mean that she would escape, or wish to escape, from Frederica's domination. Frederica, at twenty-four, would manoeuvre elaborately to keep the newspaper out of Cecily's view, because she did not like her to read it. She wanted Cecily to remain a child. (54)

Delafield clearly identifies Frederica's unhealthy possessiveness as a consequence of Lady Marlowe's domineering and controlling ways. To reinforce this, Delafield characterises Cecily as a nascent feminist: "Cecily had once, under the pressure of Lady Marlowe's mockery and of Frederica's imperative cross-questionings, admitted that she did think that really, women ought to

have the vote” (54). It is Cecily, oppressed and constrained by mother and sister, who agrees with the point of view of the suffragists; Monica, with her comparatively liberal mother, parrots her parents’ opinions, suggesting that women are fighting for the vote out of “hysteria, and wanting to be conspicuous” (149). Frederica describes the militant suffragettes as “[w]omen who bite policemen” (149) when, ironically, to cope with her mother’s cruelty she has to resort to biting her own “thin wrist until tiny purple marks sprang into view” (55). Delafield’s irony exposes the oppression that led to militancy, and connects the upper-class daughters of her fiction with the history of feminist campaigning. Delafield presents Frederica and Cecily without the irony and ambiguity which characterises Monica, and their resentment of their mother is plainly described without any sense that they have internalised her values in the way that Monica has; Lady Marlowe’s treatment of her daughters is presented as simply harmful and, eventually, cruel and callous.

After Cecily’s engagement to Dr Corderey has been called off, Lady Marlowe calls on the Ingrams to tell the story and to explain how she has decided to deal with her daughters:

I simply read them the Riot Act. This, I said, is the last straw. I’m not going to give either of you any more chances. It’s no pleasure to me, I said, to be seen about with two young women of nearly six feet high who can’t smile, can’t talk, can’t dance, can’t hold themselves properly, and in fact can’t do anything at all except make absurd scenes and be intense about one another. It’s thoroughly unnatural [...] I’m going to let each of them have an allowance, and they can stay where they are, in the country. (199)

Monica considers Lady Marlowe with a “dreadful fascination” and wonders “Did she know she was cruel?” (199) Later on, even Mrs. Ingram manages to admit that Lady Marlowe “has never been very nice” to her daughters, but explains this by asserting that “it’s a bitter disappointment for a woman to have two daughters, and no son at all” (220). Mrs. Ingram, Delafield suggests, is on the same continuum of adherence to patriarchal values as Lady Marlowe. The Marlowes can be read as an extreme case, but Delafield’s narrative insists on the proximity of the two families in terms of beliefs and values, implying that Monica has only been saved from a similar fate by good fortune and the slightly better nature of her mother.

As in *The Heel of Achilles*, Delafield puts her explicit feminist argument into the mouth of a young man seeking to marry one of the protagonists: Dr Corderey, the doctor who proposes to Cecily. Dr Corderey is relatively young, and positioned outside Monica’s class, although as a doctor he has access to intimate aspects of his patients’ lives as well as to their homes. Monica realises that interaction with him when Frederica and Lady Marlowe have influenza is giving Cecily the opportunity for self-expression: “He asked Cecily’s opinion, and she gave it. Monica realised that it was almost the only time she had ever heard Cecily assert an independent view of her own. Perhaps she had held independent views in her own mind – but she had not hitherto dared put them into words” (161). Dr Corderey not only gives Cecily the opportunity to speak her mind, but articulates the unhealthy psychological relationship between the two sisters; he also links this explicitly to political arguments about gender roles, telling Monica that the life she has been reared for and is enduring – “you live at home, and have nothing to do [...] if you were forced to earn your own

living tomorrow, you'd have to starve" – is the cause of physical and mental illness, as well as a profound unhappiness (163). Monica is initially offended at this, "because she knew her mother would think she ought to be offended" but she cannot "pretend to disagree" (163). Dr Corderey's ideas resonate with Monica; she thinks "very often" about what he has said "and could not decide whether she agreed with Dr Corderey, or distrusted him as her mother would have done" (165). Her conversation with him gives her a critical position from which she can consider her life. Like Cecily, however, she will eventually reject this position in order to conform to her mother's wishes.

Dr Corderey's insistence that women's disorders are frequently due to "mind, not body" links him with the modern science of psychology and his challenge to accepted gender roles – "I'd like to see you rebel against everything that you've been taught and defy everyone" – connects him to feminist politics (164). Like Roland Valentine in *The Heel of Achilles*, he is a disruptive modern force, dismissed by Mrs. Ingram as uttering "some modern nonsense" (166) even though she herself has recognised the instability of the Marlowe daughters, suggesting that "Cecily looks to me as if she might go off her head at any minute" (155). Most of Dr Corderey's disruptive power comes from his willingness to transgress class boundaries, still a live issue for interwar middlebrow readers as the middle classes sought to define themselves; his proposal to Cecily is only tolerated by Lady Marlowe because Cecily is thirty and unmarried (197). Cecily's sub-plot, which is mostly conveyed through reported speech as Mr Pelham and Lady Marlowe herself pass on the gossip, helps support Delafield's feminist arguments about access to agency and subjectivity for young women: like Monica, Cecily's only chance of becoming a recognised subject in her social milieu is through marriage. There are, obviously, ironies here: both Monica and Cecily are likely to only attain limited freedom through engaging in another relationship of unequal power, regardless of the status they will attain as married women. However, the story of the Marlowes also allows Delafield to expose the power of anti-feminist women over other women: Cecily is manipulated by Frederica to give up her engagement, and Frederica's neurosis is clearly ascribed to the effects of Lady Marlowe's mothering.

Delafield's critique is, however, complicated as well as reinforced by her use of the sub-plot involving the Marlowes. Her critique of Mrs. Ingram's methods, even though it takes account of her social context, is evident: the narrative describes Monica as having a nascent subjectivity which is suppressed predominantly by her conviction that her mother is correct in all things, and which we can assume will continue to be suppressed by her marriage to Mr Pelham, in which she will be required to continue to perform the expected role. Monica's story in itself constitutes a feminist critique of a society that insists upon wifehood as the only possible female role. However, Mrs Ingram may be read as a comparatively reasonable mother, and Monica's mistakes and silliness can account for her strict approach. As argued in my second chapter in respect of lesbian characterisations, the Marlowes form a sideshow element which functions as a means of maintaining middlebrow palatability in the narrative. By displacing the extreme and monstrous possibilities emanating from tyrannical motherhood onto the Marlowes, Monica and her mother

retain their attractiveness as characters, and the risk of Monica becoming as warped as Frederica is mitigated. The feminist argument about Monica's upbringing remains implicit because an explicit argument is conducted in the text about the Marlowe daughters. It is only through an attentive reading of Delafield's irony that the full effect of her critique of Mrs. Ingram can be felt and the relative positions of the Ingrams and the Marlowes on a continuum of oppression be discerned. Without that irony, the two families can be read as oppositional, with Monica and Mrs. Ingram defined by that opposition as essentially normal, and the political meaning of the text diffused so that middlebrow readability is not disturbed.

Delafield's use of irony in this text, however, works both to support and detract from its feminism. As discussed in the Introduction, a determined reading against Delafield's irony could experience the narrative as leading to a genuinely happy resolution for Monica. Because an understanding of Delafield's irony is required to detect the critique of Mrs. Ingram, the Marlowes' story carries the explicit feminist meaning of the novel, meaning that feminist critique is associated with grotesque extremes rather than with the 'normal' protagonists. This ambiguous use of irony, however, supports the positioning of the novel as a middlebrow text. It allows the sympathetic middlebrow reader to detect and understand Delafield's irony and to enjoy the textual pleasure of having done so; for the conservative middlebrow reader, the cloak of irony allows the novel to avoid an overt and disruptive radical political position. This is, however, a more sophisticated means of maintaining middlebrow palatability than the associations between controlling motherhood and challenging gender roles set up in *The Heel of Achilles*. The most conservative reader, after all, could not fail to recognise that Mr Pelham is represented as a husband of last resort; Monica's compromise is explicit, however happy it makes her.

Mothers and daughters in modernism and the middlebrow

The drama between the oppressive, phallic mother and her resisting daughter also finds its way into the works of canonical modernist and highbrow women writers of the same period. In this section I focus on the work of Virginia Woolf as an exemplar of modernist narratives of maternal control in order to compare her approach with that of Delafield and distinguish modernist and middlebrow representations of this theme. Woolf's mothers can be as controlling and manipulative as Delafield's; however, her modernist approach to the representation of interiority and subjectivity allows the exploration of a greater ambivalence about the mother-daughter relationship. Mothers are depicted as positive as well as negative factors in their daughters' lives; daughters are able to recognise, and to evaluate, the good and bad elements of the maternal legacy. Rather than depending on a third-person narrative voice, as Delafield does in *Thank Heaven Fasting* to distinguish between strict Mrs. Ingram and oppressive Lady Marlowe, Woolf relies on interior monologue and elliptical dialogues to construct mother-daughter relationships. However, in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Years* some maternal representations are closely related to Delafield's narratives of oppressive

motherhood. Mrs. Ramsay is a much-loved maternal figure, but her views of women's roles are conservative, and her daughters may only

in silence[...] sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers, in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life, not always taking care of some man or other; for there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry, of the Bank of England and the Indian Empire, of ringed fingers and lace, though to them all there was something in this of the essence of beauty, which called out the manliness in their girlish hearts, and made them, as they sat at table beneath their mother's eyes, honour her strange severity, her extreme courtesy, like a Queen's raising from the mud a beggar's dirty foot and washing it, when she thus admonished them.⁵⁴⁴

Prue, Nancy and Rose may "sport" with contrary views, but as the rest of this paragraph makes plain, Mrs. Ramsay's matriarchal power suppresses open rebellion by making it undesirable to them. As Ellen Bayuk Rosenman suggests, "Mrs. Ramsay, inhibits her daughters in *To the Lighthouse* [...] through] her authority as a compelling model of femininity [...] the particular role which she represents, 'always serving some man or other', enforces the daughter's subordination within a social structure and reduces her to a merely peripheral object of the mother's attention, which focuses first of all on men"⁵⁴⁵ Mrs. Ramsay can therefore be read as part of a continuum of representation of oppressive motherhood in women's fiction of the interwar period.

Lily Briscoe, for whom Mrs. Ramsay is a mother-figure, is more able to express her objections to Mrs. Ramsay's insistence that she should marry, and more able to form a critical view of her: "Then, [Lily] remembered, she had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay's lap and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand" (50). But, as Rosenman notes, Lily's position even while she laughs at Mrs. Ramsay's notions is one of "extreme dependence"; this position, and her hysteria, suggest "both the intensity and the inexpressibility of her response".⁵⁴⁶ Mrs. Ramsay, too, experiences some ambivalence about her own position:

And here she was, she reflected, finding life rather sinister again, making Minta marry Paul Rayley; because whatever she might feel about her own transaction and she had had experiences which need not happen to everyone (she did not name them to herself) she was driven on, too quickly she knew, almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children. (58)

Mrs. Ramsay's frequently articulated beliefs in marriage and heterosexuality are, this passage suggests, an "escape" from her own knowledge and experience of marriage. Woolf's narrative suggests that maternal insistence on matrimony as the appropriate destiny for daughters comes, in fact, from a position of doubt. Woolf's ambivalent approach also allows her to represent and valorize the merging of mother and daughter identities. For Rosenman, Woolf retrieves the lost mother by recreating "the sense of pre-Oedipal wholeness in her novels. This wholeness appears

⁵⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd, 1977 (1927)), p12. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

⁵⁴⁵ Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, *The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), p47-48

⁵⁴⁶ Rosenman, p104

most obviously in the states of merging and diffusion which are among the most compelling experiences in Woolf's works".⁵⁴⁷ For Delafield, however, merging with the mother is inimical to the establishment of daughterly subjectivity. Part of the irony of Monica's story is that she can only achieve this subjectivity and separate from her mother by becoming a married woman and therefore more like her mother. Delafield establishes the loss of boundaries between Monica and her mother through an authoritative narrative voice; Woolf uses interior monologue to show daughterly subjectivity suppressing its own will in favour of the mother:

when Mrs. Ramsay said all this, as the glance in her eyes said it, of course for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment – what happens if one is not nice to that young man there – and be nice. (86)

Woolf also allows a more complex set of mother-daughter connections to develop, not only describing the relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and her four daughters, but also giving her a quasi-daughter in Lily Briscoe. This diversity contrasts with Delafield, who focuses on fewer characters; however, Woolf's critique of motherhood is reinforced rather than undermined by this device, since Lily's outsider status allows a summative, critical, and external viewpoint on the mother-daughter dyad. Delafield's excursion into consideration of other mother-daughter relations through the Marlowes diffuses her feminist viewpoint as much as it underpins it.

In *The Years*, Woolf examines an even greater diversity of mother-daughter relationships through the multi-generational narrative of the Pargiter cousins. Rosenman detects the continuing maternal 'centre' through Rose and her sister Eugenie, who both die during the course of the novel but whose presence lives on, represented in the physical world by a portrait in oils and an Italian mirror respectively: "The daughters have inherited not simply the memory and possession of an individual woman but authorised images of womanhood, of conventional sociability and family ties".⁵⁴⁸ Woolf gives the Pargiter daughters diverse relationships with motherhood and diverse life stories.

Representations of daughterly resistance in *The Years* are explored through this variety of characters. Delia is the daughter who voices most clearly her ambivalence about her mother; she longs for her mother's death, seeing Rose as "an obstacle, a prevention, an impediment to all life".⁵⁴⁹ At her mother's graveside, she realises that this "impediment" has now been removed:

[Delia] stared down into the grave. There lay her mother; in that coffin – the woman she had loved and hated so. Her eyes dazzled. She was afraid that she might faint; but she must look; she must feel. It was the last chance that was left her [...] she was possessed with a sense of something everlasting; of life mixing with death, of death becoming life. For as she looked she heard the sparrow's chirp quicker and quicker; she heard wheels in the distance become louder and louder; life came closer and closer ... (68)

⁵⁴⁷ Rosenman, p20

⁵⁴⁸ Rosenman, p49

⁵⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd, 1977 (1937)), p19. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

Through Delia, Woolf expresses the liberation that daughters may feel on the death of the mother, but she still acknowledges the affection that underlies daughterly resentment. Kitty is a less dramatic representation of such resentment, a young woman at odds with her mother and trying to find an alternative way of living: “[Kitty] bent down and gave her mother the perfunctory little peck that was the only sign they ever gave each other outwardly of their affection. Yet they were very fond of each other; yet they always quarrelled.” (64) Kitty’s story is resolved hopefully; she gains the rural life in Yorkshire she has hoped for, but also makes a good marriage, becoming Lady Lasswade. Woolf suggests through Kitty that it may be possible to perform the role of ‘good daughter’ but retain and sustain individual agency. For Rosenman, Eleanor and her niece Peggy form “an imperfect but indisputably new version of mother-daughter inheritance between two single women”.⁵⁵⁰ This type of quasi-maternal relationship echoes interwar writing on the pervasive nature of maternity and the assumption that all women were maternal, whether or not they were actually mothers. Woolf’s depiction of relations of this sort is optimistic, since it indicates the possibility of other ways of life for women, but is clearly influenced by the notions of her contemporary society, including contemporary feminist society, about proper gender roles. However, other critics have detected a conservative effect in *The Years*. Clare Hanson considers that, despite the novel’s radicalism, “the reader is acutely conscious of the characters’ inability to throw off in any way the ‘weight’ of social pressure, which, in Woolf’s word, ‘sinks’ the life of the individual”.⁵⁵¹

Woolf’s novel goes beyond Delafield’s into imagining a world after maternal influence; Delafield does not, for example, describe the married life of Monica or Jennie. If the reader sustains Delafield’s irony, however, she can imagine the likely scenarios: Monica has married a bore whom she does not love; Jennie’s new husband has joined the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War and is therefore highly unlikely to survive unharmed. The reader closes the book without any sense that these young women will achieve even a precarious contentment. Woolf’s novel – by following its characters into the present day, and by Woolf’s commitment to representing interiority – allows the possibility of other ways of living, still precarious and insecure, but opening up possibilities of greater freedom and satisfaction.

Comparing Woolf’s and Delafield’s dramas of mother-daughter relations points up the differences in their representation of feminist argument. Woolf develops a multivalent, layered and complex feminist argument which allows her to create “a consolatory fiction [...] of an ideal relation between women, or between mother and daughter, through which feminine identity is both discovered and confirmed”⁵⁵² but also, through characters such as Lily Briscoe and Eleanor Pargiter, to criticise notions of compulsory maternity and to establish possibilities of other ways of

⁵⁵⁰ Rosenman, p49

⁵⁵¹ Clare Hanson: ‘Virginia Woolf in the House of Love: Compulsory Heterosexuality in *The Years*’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 6:1 (1997), 55-62 (p58)

⁵⁵² Hanson, p60

living. This complex but single argument allows her to represent the co-existence of ideas of mothering as both a negative and a positive force in the life of daughters. Delafield, however, develops and maintains multiple feminist arguments that sometimes contradict each other and are maintained alongside a conservative and oppositional argument. These multiple arguments are partly due to her realist approach; the sometimes foolish, but doubtless realistic, behaviour of her daughter-characters undercuts her argument for greater freedom for young women; her insistence on the specific personal failings of her characters works against her broader argument against the general conditions of women's lives. Her negative characterisations of powerful and successful women like Lydia Damerel and Lady Marlowe chime with anti-feminist suggestions that such women become unfitted for motherhood by their power and success. Her realism allow her novels to convey multiple meanings, the readings of which may depend on the political sympathies of the individual reader, but it does not allow for the development of a multilayered and complex but still optimistic position in respect of mother-daughter relationships in her fiction.

Chapter 4 “She was fundamentally happier, and enjoying a greater freedom, than ever in her life before”: working and writing women

The problematic position of women’s paid work outside the home is a dominant theme throughout Delafield’s fiction. As with her fictions of lesbianism and mother-daughter relationships, Delafield’s representations of women’s work engage with a topic that was problematic for interwar society and the subject both of feminist debate and campaigning and hostile anti-feminist criticism. She approaches this contentious topic with a modified version of the ambivalence that characterises her fiction and allows dual readings to emerge that may be either hostile or favourable to women’s work outside the home. Her novels of women’s work create both a dominant narrative that is markedly conservative in its attitude to women’s work, and a frequently subversive, more radical narrative that articulates a feminist argument in support of access to paid work for women. This ambivalence helps Delafield’s fiction to remain acceptable and palatable to the perhaps politically diverse audience for her fiction, but it also ensures that varied opinions about the status, value and acceptability of women’s work are constructed and discussed within the novels. Interwar feminist opinion valued proper and fitting occupation for women very highly, and Delafield – often through sub-plots or marginal characters – does demonstrate the beneficial and fulfilling possibilities of work. However, she also engages with notions of work as a means of avoiding interiority and greater self-knowledge when it is overly concerned with purely external motivations, and this applies also to her characters who work as writers; her novels do not present the writer as necessarily engaged in the pursuit of personal and therefore aesthetic development. Work, in these fictions, is variously performed in response to external motivating factors such as status and money, and in pursuit of more interior motivations such as self-knowledge, self-expression and personal fulfilment. Delafield’s worker-protagonists tend to the exceptional: entrepreneurs or published authors who enter the world of work from a privileged position. While this exceptionality can be reassuring to the conservative reader, since it implies that most women will remain content with a domestic role, it also risks the implication that work outside the home is only for the privileged few. Delafield counters this implication through an insistence on the relation of the domestic and the everyday to the world of women’s work, suggesting a normalisation of the concept of paid work for women and a democratisation of access to the workplace, including the literary workplace.

The ambiguity that characterises Delafield’s fiction ensures that the reading that emerges is dependent on the sympathies and the attentiveness of the reader of the text. In *Faster! Faster!* (1935), discussed in detail in this chapter, Delafield constructs a working woman as protagonist who is characterised as profoundly negative and whose narrative is resolved by a tragic event. The overt conservatism of this novel is extreme; however, the text also features marginally constructed feminist arguments about women’s work which express a radicalism beyond prevailing feminist opinion at the time of publication. The ambiguity evident in Delafield’s novels dealing with other

themes is modified; her novels of work deal in more polarised representations of political views, and make use of a greater degree of melodrama in plot and resolution. This modified ambivalence may relate to the position of women's work as something that could be discussed openly and was the subject of extensive public debate, in comparison to more controversial topics such as lesbianism which were subject to much more constrained discussion and therefore required a more ambiguous presentation in fiction. Extreme political opinions and melodramatic plot outcomes may also be a means of making Delafield's ideas about women's work heard within the context of an ongoing noisy and often antagonistic public debate.

Delafield's typical realism, palatable to a middlebrow readership, is maintained in her narratives of work, which generally deal with the unexceptional clerical, secretarial and ancillary domestic work that was available to middle-class women at the time. However, the drama of these narratives often depends on the representation of exceptional women who have achieved seniority at work, who are entrepreneurs, or who are able to earn a living from writing. Deborah Thom detects in photographs of women's war work "a developing iconography of the working woman which emphasised the novel, the exceptional and the photogenic [...] The consequence, intentional or otherwise, was to emphasise discontinuity."⁵⁵³ Delafield's fictions of work contribute to a literary iconography which "emphasise[s] discontinuity", reassuring the reader that her women workers are either exceptional, like Claudia Winsloe in *Faster! Faster!*, or will eventually abandon their work for marriage, like Pauline Marchrose in *Tension*. This reassurance supports the overt conservative readings of her novels, avoiding a direct challenge to prevailing traditional notions of appropriate gender roles. However, her insistence on the mundane nature of much of women's work, and its relationship to women's traditional domestic role, complicates the traditional readings of these texts. Even her writer-protagonists root their writing in the domestic by drawing upon it as source material; they also rely on their earnings from writing to support their families. The work Delafield's characters undertake, even those who are in some way exceptional, is then either quasi-domestic in nature or takes a form which had, by the interwar period, become acceptable as 'women's work'. Her iterated representations of such work can be read as a realist critique of the limited opportunities available to women, but also help to emphasise the interconnection of women's paid work with their domestic roles, a concept that is particularly explicit in her narratives of women who work as writers. Delafield's narratives of work express a variable view of the potential for self-fulfilment through work, including the aesthetic role of the writer. Her writer-protagonists are not constructed within a narrative of the artist's growth and development; similarly, her other workers sometimes achieve satisfaction or personal growth through their work, but more often work is a means to some other end. Delafield's fictions of work espouse the view that work of some kind is important and necessary, satisfying a need for occupation as well as a need for money, but work – even work as a writer – does not necessarily function within these

⁵⁵³ Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I* (London: I B Tauris, 2000), p37

fictions as a route to greater self-knowledge or a means of expressing interiority. In *Faster! Faster!* and *The Way Things Are*, work can, to the contrary, become a distraction from the pursuit of self-understanding and the development of interiority.

In this chapter, I examine the literary and historical context for Delafield's narratives of women's work, and consider the representation of women's work in *Faster! Faster!* (1936), and the representations of woman writers in *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (1930) and *The Way Things Are* (1927). Although Delafield's novels contain many representations of working-class women's labour in domestic service and other settings, my argument will focus on representations of work outside the home by middle-class or upper-middle-class women, and on the feminist position of the Six Point Group, with which Delafield was associated through her connection with *Time and Tide*, and which argued strongly for better employment opportunities for women. I argue that, in common with Delafield's other works, these narratives maintain the possibility of dual political readings, created in part through marginal or subversive engagements with feminist politics, and dependent on the position and engagement of the reader. Delafield's insistence on the interreliance of women's paid work and their domestic responsibilities establishes an argument in favour of women's work that would attract more radical readers, but also maintain palatability for the conservative reader concerned by the withdrawal of women from the domestic sphere; the overt conservatism of her plots also reassures the reader holding traditional views about women's entry into the workplace. Through a consideration of the textual ambiguity of her novels, I explore the ways in which Delafield's representations of women's work function as analogies for the concept of the middlebrow, allowing for an interrogation of its attendant debates about authenticity, status and value, and how these novels create a space in which Delafield can contribute to the construction of the concept of the middlebrow text.

As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the Leavisite model of the middlebrow is founded on increased rates of literacy; this increased literacy is an effect of changes to education policy and practice, and drives an expansion of the literary marketplace, with new literary products emerging to meet the requirements of that marketplace. Nicola Humble's "feminine middlebrow" category derives from the status of its readers and from its focus in terms of content on the domestic, the familial and interpersonal relationships. Both models emphasise the generally binary gender division of the highbrow and middlebrow, with the category of the highbrow dominated by male writers, while the category of the middlebrow admits a much greater number of women writers. Delafield's texts show how the fictional representation of women's work can be read as analogous to both these definitions of the middlebrow. Women's work, like Leavis's middlebrow, is made possible partly through feminist campaigning, partly by government policy and mainly through the demands of the market. Women's entry in significant numbers to the writing profession is made possible by similar factors. Women's work remains, like the middlebrow, a problematic category throughout Delafield's writing career. Delafield's fictions of women's work insist on the interrelationship between work and the personal sphere, exploring in particular the

familial disruption caused by women's engagement in paid work. However, these texts also demonstrate the incursion of the domestic into the traditionally masculine world of paid work through the types of work her women workers undertake, and the way in which they undertake it. This relationship between constructs of the middlebrow and women's engagement with paid work is further emphasised by Delafield's depictions of women writers and the imbrication of the social, economic and domestic factors which inspire and motivate their writing. Melissa Sullivan argues that Delafield viewed the middlebrow as "an alternative arena of 'legitimate culture' and her work within *Time and Tide* revolved around asserting and supporting this argument"; through her comic writing, book reviews, and particularly the serialisation of the Provincial Lady novels, Sullivan suggests, Delafield contributed to the development and construction of the middlebrow as writing "concerned with the everyday, without being formulaic or sentimental; intelligent without being elitist; and comic with key arguments on gender, cultural hierarchies, and life outside of highbrow circles".⁵⁵⁴ I argue that Delafield's representations of work mirror such an understanding of the middlebrow, and provide a further opportunity to discuss and construct, sometimes through analogy, notions of middlebrow writing undertaken by women.

Women's work in the interwar period

Delafield's peers among interwar women writers also dealt extensively with the debate about women's work. Those writers linked, like Delafield, with *Time and Tide* unsurprisingly embraced very positive attitudes towards the possibility of paid work outside the home for middle-class women, including married women and those with children. Vera Brittain's novel *Honourable Estate* (1935) creates an exemplary career woman, the radicalised daughter of a factory owner who eventually becomes a Member of Parliament and makes a successful marriage founded on equality. Winifred Holtby's fiction features a range of working women, from the heroic and idealised schoolteacher Sarah Burton in *South Riding* (1936) to the evangelical filmmaker in *Poor Caroline* (1931). Neville in Rose Macaulay's *Dangerous Ages* (1921) attempts to revive her medical career once her children are grown up, with little success. All of these novels engage with the new opportunities available to women in the twentieth century, and the conflict taking up such opportunities involves for the middle-class girl; however, the familial or marital conflict described often concludes with women abandoning their careers in favour of marriage, sacrificing personal relationships to their work, or somehow managing to manipulate their careers into domestic success, perhaps by finding a husband at their workplace. Women's work also features strongly in crime fiction of the period; Dorothy L Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935) in particular considers her protagonist Harriet Vane's conflicting desires for professional success as a writer and for marriage. Resentment of the professional woman and her trespass upon the male territory of work is at the heart of the crimes

⁵⁵⁴ Melissa Sullivan "I return with immense relief to old friend Time and Tide": Middlebrow Expansions in E.M. Delafield's Fiction and Journalism', *Modernist Cultures* Volume 6, pp 96-120, 2011 (pp107-108)

that Harriet investigates, but her own dilemmas about work and marriage form an equally important part of the narrative.

Delafield's fictions of women's work are more akin to Sayers' problematic view of women's proper role than to the exemplary women workers that populate the novels of Brittain and Holtby. An unpublished story entitled "Career?" typifies her approach; Rose Valentine, a debutante radicalised after a suffragette brick smashes her drawing-room window, is eventually elected to Parliament and rewarded with a Damehood.⁵⁵⁵ However, the value of all her achievements is undercut by the final scene of the treatment, in which she cannot attract the attention of her staff, because they are all transfixed by a colleague's baby. Delafield presents Rose's choice as binary, between career success and personal fulfilment through maternity, and this binary approach is evident in some of her other novels that deal with this theme. The early novels *The War-Workers* (1918) and *Tension* (1920) deal, respectively, with women's involvement in patriotic war service and with working life for Edwardian women; both engage with notions of the relationship between work and family duty. In *The War-Workers*, Delafield explores the proper motivations for war-work, and opposes duty to work with duty to family. Her protagonist Charmian is ultimately rejected by her family because of her excessive, ego-driven devotion to her war-work; the narrative strongly suggests that women should put family considerations first, even in war-time. *Tension*, set in the Edwardian era, is unusual in Delafield's work in that it makes explicit the drudgery of women's work, although this may be specific to the class position of her protagonist, Pauline Marchrose, an impoverished upper-class girl working to support herself. Pauline has sought liberation and independence through secretarial work, but found it wanting:

I took up work because I was tired of living at home. A good many girls are like that. However, in our case, there was very little money, and it was just as well that I should do something [...] another thing I hadn't realised beforehand was the deadly monotony of it – day after day, sitting in the clatter of all those machines, and typing as hard as one could go. Nothing to look forward to, except Saturday afternoon and Sunday, and then I was dead tired [...]⁵⁵⁶

Pauline does, however, experience work as more pleasurable and satisfying when she takes up her post at the college where the novel is set. Delafield's upper-class young women who take up work more often express thoughts similar to those of Cassie in *Turn Back the Leaves* (1930): "Her work absorbed and interested her, she had made friends, and was guiltily aware that, in spite of the war, and anxiety for [her brother], and compassion for her parents, she was fundamentally happier, and enjoying a greater freedom, than ever in her life before."⁵⁵⁷ This prevailing view of work as liberating echoes Delafield's own account of her experience of war-work. Working as a clerk during the First World War, she was paid a pound a week and lodged in an Exeter hostel. "It was independence [...] it was emancipation of the most delirious kind, it was occupation, it was self-

⁵⁵⁵ E.M. Delafield, 'Career?', in E.M. Delafield fonds, University of British Columbia Library Special Collections and Rare Books, (folder 3.2, pp1-17)

⁵⁵⁶ E.M. Delafield, *Tension* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), pp67-69

⁵⁵⁷ E.M. Delafield, *Turn Back the Leaves* (London: Macmillan, 1930), p258

respect – above all, it was freedom.”⁵⁵⁸ However, Delafield’s texts usually oppose this liberation with the conflicting demands of familial or marital obligations, or with the demands of a particular class position; Antoinette in *The Suburban Young Man* gives up her job partly because of ill health and partly because her upper-class mother requires her daughter’s company. Women who remain devoted to their work are likely to pay the price in terms of damage to their family relationships; this problem is explored in more detail below.

Like Harriet Vane, Delafield’s women workers have the best opportunity to combine work and marriage, and even motherhood, when they work at writing. Delafield’s most sustained representation of a woman writer appears in the Provincial Lady novels. Delafield frequently underplays the literary achievements of the Provincial Lady, but also makes a claim to literary work for married women and mothers as an appropriate and compatible activity. Writing can be characterised as an important feminist act which, through self-expression, helps construct feminist subjectivity for women; Delafield’s writing women negotiate a space for this work, and therefore this subjectivity, within their domestic responsibilities. However, the sort of writing her protagonist produces is often described as unliterary, unchallenging or unintellectual – in short, as writing within the definition of the feminine middlebrow. This self-referential representation of feminine middlebrow writing within a definitively feminine middlebrow text engages with the debate about literary value and status that continued throughout Delafield’s writing career, and supports a reading of these texts in which work becomes legible as analogous to the concept of the middlebrow. In this chapter I also explore the ways in which Delafield represents women writers in two texts, *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (1930) and *The Way Things Are* (1927). I argue that Delafield both asserts and subverts the idea of the writer as a person of cultural or social significance; this ambiguous representation is achieved through depictions of her writer-protagonists’ relationships with readers, writers, and the social trappings of literary culture, through an insistence on the importance of writing as a means of earning money, and by ensuring that the interconnected relationship between women’s writing and their domestic lives is repeatedly exposed. Delafield’s writers and the work they produce emerge from an intermediate, flexible space that must necessarily accommodate their domestic responsibilities. Such representations of writers as ambiguous in status, motivated at least in part by the need to earn money, and adaptable to the circumstances available to them have strong affinities with the characterisation of the middlebrow literary artefact.

Delafield wrote her novels during a period in which women’s work outside the home was a continual subject of debate and anxiety. The nineteenth-century ideal of femininity, the lady of leisure, was used to criticise both working-class and middle-class women who undertook paid work.⁵⁵⁹ Increased child mortality during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods fed anxiety

⁵⁵⁸ E.M. Delafield, ‘E.M. Delafield’, in *Beginnings*, ed. by L. A. G. Strong (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1935), pp62–78 (p72)

⁵⁵⁹ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2005), p17

about the impact of married women's employment on mothering; there was no firm evidence of a link, but nevertheless the idea that paid work was inimical to motherhood became prevalent and accepted.⁵⁶⁰ However, there was an increasing economic need for a variety of women to work throughout the Victorian and Edwardian periods. This has been variously ascribed to increased mechanisation, which meant that domestic industries moved out of the home and into factories;⁵⁶¹ to the reduction in middle-class incomes during the late Victorian period; and to the expansion of 'respectable' occupations, at least for young women, in retail and clerical settings.⁵⁶² Delafield's lower-middle-class Lydia, from *The Heel of Achilles* (1921), exemplifies the late Victorian young woman who is obliged to earn her living through working in clerical roles; her work (and her ambition to work) is accepted as normal and respectable by her family, and in fact helps her achieve a socially advantageous marriage. The new opportunities for women, however, remained limited in terms of scope and remuneration with women "corralled into low-paid, dead-end jobs with no prospect of career progression beyond supervising other women".⁵⁶³

The First World War saw considerable increases in the employment of women.⁵⁶⁴ The largest areas of expansion early in the war were in retail and clerical work, sectors that already employed large numbers of women, and these expansions were due to the loss of male employees to the war effort.⁵⁶⁵ Anxieties related to women's working persisted, particularly in respect of working wives and mothers, although middle-class women in particular benefited from an increased sense that it was acceptable for them to work out of patriotic duty.⁵⁶⁶ However, government policy ensured that women would undertake this work for the duration of the war only; ⁵⁶⁷ women also undertook work mostly in existing fields of employment for women or related to traditional gender roles, involving ancillary and supportive tasks such as clerical work or cooking.⁵⁶⁸ At the end of the war, not only were women demobilised from war-work and restrictive employment practices reinstated, but many women "were content to stand down" in favour of men returning from the war.⁵⁶⁹ Despite this, historians tend to agree that war-work had changed social attitudes to the idea of women's paid work outside the home, particularly for middle-class young women for whom it had now become bound up with notions of self-development and patriotic duty.

Interwar feminist organisations, including the Six Point Group with which Delafield was associated, built on these notions as they continued to campaign for equality of opportunity to the workplace. Statistical interpretations of census data vary, but it does appear that more women were

⁵⁶⁰ Holloway, p78-79

⁵⁶¹ Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1880-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989), p65

⁵⁶² Holloway, p54

⁵⁶³ Holloway, p126

⁵⁶⁴ Holloway, p133

⁵⁶⁵ Thom, p30

⁵⁶⁶ Holloway, p140

⁵⁶⁷ Holloway, p140

⁵⁶⁸ Lucy Noakes, 'Eve in Khaki: Women Working with the British Military, 1915-1918' in *Women and Work Culture: Britain c.1850-1950* ed. by Krista Cowman and Louise A. Jackson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp213-228 (pp222-223)

⁵⁶⁹ Holloway, p146

employed outside the home, at least until marriage, during the interwar period.⁵⁷⁰ Opportunities for women, and their rates of employment, seem to have been slowly increasing, but in the context of the enduring ideology of the domestic woman:

Attitudes to women's work in the interwar years appear to have been little different to those found in earlier generations. It would seem that the *majority* of people [...] believed that a woman's place, and especially a married woman's place, was in the home, not in the factory, shop or office.⁵⁷¹

Elizabeth Roberts goes on to argue that interwar women often “saw their emancipation as being a move *away* from paid work outside the home towards staying there”, influenced by prevailing notions of “the domestic idyll” and the very real “double burden of work carried by full-time working women”.⁵⁷² Delafield's short story ‘The Girl who Told the Truth’ (1939) bears out this tendency. Her protagonist resigns from a secure job as secretary-companion because she has chosen to marry a man she does not love; as she tells her astonished employer, the “chance of getting a home, and a husband to keep them” is more attractive than tedious and demanding office work.⁵⁷³ Additionally, there was hostility to married women working during the Depression of the 1930s, who were “frequently admonished in these years for ‘taking men's jobs’”.⁵⁷⁴ Delafield depicts working married women and mothers who are willing to work against widely held public opinion and to resist compulsion towards a wholly domestic role. However, this was also a context in which the number of young married women in employment was increasing, despite negative commentaries from the press and some sustained campaigning from trade unions and professional organisations.⁵⁷⁵ It is likely that Delafield's readership would have drawn on the increasing numbers of women who worked outside the home, another factor which explains her persistent interest in representing paid work and the ideologies which constrain opportunity.

The group of feminist writers associated with *Time and Tide* and the Six Point Group wrote extensively on the issues of women's access to the workforce, for equal pay and for equal access to the professions during the interwar period.⁵⁷⁶ Two book-length works, both produced as guides to younger women considering their careers, indicate the equality feminist approach to these issues. Vera Brittain's 1928 *Women's Work in Modern England* is generally antipathetic to the idea of the leisured married woman who, she considers, leads “a life of idleness and futility”.⁵⁷⁷ She is, however, an enthusiast for the working married woman as a counter-argument against ideas that women are uncommitted to work: “A few women whose business careers survive marriage are

⁵⁷⁰ Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p57

⁵⁷¹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work 1840-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p72, emphasis in original.

⁵⁷² Roberts, p16

⁵⁷³ E.M. Delafield, ‘The Girl Who Told the Truth’, in *Love Has No Resurrection* (London: Macmillan, 1939), pp121-128 (p128)

⁵⁷⁴ Beddoe, p84

⁵⁷⁵ Beddoe, p59

⁵⁷⁶ Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p191

⁵⁷⁷ Vera Brittain, *Women's Work in Modern England* (London: Noel Douglas, 1928), p2

probably worth more at the present time to the prospects of women in the commercial world than any number who are efficient but unmarried.”⁵⁷⁸ Ray Strachey’s similar work, published during the Depression in 1935, emphasises the growing acceptability of work for women even after marriage, and the concurrent “compelling” economic reason for women to work.⁵⁷⁹ Strachey argues against a binary view of paid work as oppositional to home-making and child-rearing,⁵⁸⁰ and points to the prevalence of the employment of married women despite general “public hostility” to this practice.⁵⁸¹ She also foregrounds the benefits of work for married women, stating that work can provide “mental change and refreshment” for women whose “lives, as a rule, are very closely tied up with the details of human relationships”.⁵⁸² Both books rely significantly on statistical evidence to argue for the normality of women’s work, especially married women’s work, and in Strachey’s case to demonstrate particularly that working women are not ‘taking a man’s job’. The strenuousness of their arguments suggests a campaigning tone against the general antipathy of the period to married women’s employment outside the home. Delafield herself wrote an article for the *Daily Mail* decrying the assumption that domestic work was all that women were fit for, and ascribing this assumption to “a sentimental, and therefore senseless, tradition”; she argues for women to have the opportunity to do the work for which they are best fitted, rather than to be constrained by an outmoded idea of appropriate gender roles.⁵⁸³

During the interwar period, despite the social disruption of war and economic recession “patriarchal attitudes towards women still prevailed [...] Continuity was evident in the assumption that women’s role was still primarily domestic.”⁵⁸⁴ Middlebrow depictions of women’s work, including Delafield’s, reflect this attitude and sometimes reinforce the primacy of the domestic role, while also exploring arguments in favour of women’s greater entry into the workforce. However, as Gerry Holloway goes on to point out, the “conflicting demands of a patriarchal, yet capitalist, state meant there was a continual push-pull effect concerning policy related to women as workers. The two wars highlighted the impossibility of a purely domestic role for women, even if this was considered desirable.”⁵⁸⁵ Delafield’s fiction reflects and engages with this conflicted position in her depictions of women’s work outside the home.

The rather limited range of critical writing on the representation of work in English literature has generally detected an antipathy to the commercial world of work. Arthur Pollard describes how writers associated with business activity “graft, unrestrained greed and oppression of

⁵⁷⁸ Brittain, *Women’s Work in Modern England*, p37

⁵⁷⁹ Ray Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women: a survey of women’s employment and a guide for those seeking work* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1935), p17

⁵⁸⁰ Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women*, p50

⁵⁸¹ Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women*, p28

⁵⁸² Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women*, p82

⁵⁸³ E. M. Delafield, ‘A Woman’s Place is not *Always* in the Home’, *Daily Mail*, 28 February 1931, p10

⁵⁸⁴ Holloway, pp175-176

⁵⁸⁵ Holloway, pp175-176

the poor”.⁵⁸⁶ Allan Simmons argues that early-twentieth-century highbrow writing represented work as a “dehumanising daily routine, that drains the workers of life and renders them anonymous”, linking this to more general modernist concerns with the age of the masses.⁵⁸⁷ Middlebrow authors such as Bennett or Wells, Simmons suggests, were also critical of the social implications of the development of commerce and industry but wrote extensively of the details of trade; this textual attention to the world of commerce may account, he argues, for Virginia Woolf’s description of these writers as “materialist”.⁵⁸⁸ John Morris identifies the Leavisite model of the highbrow as a cultural category that denigrates “those who dealt with the realities of the world of business, industry and politics” rather than developing notions of individual subjectivity and interiority.⁵⁸⁹ Simmons and Morris’s arguments both point to the possibility of the middlebrow as a literary space in which these realities can be encountered and considered; the feminist middlebrow might therefore be a literary space in which the benefits of commercial activity for women can be explored. Delafield’s fictions do pay materialist attention to the details of women’s work, and to some extent support the notion of work as denying or effacing individual subjectivity for some characters; however, they also assert that for some women work can be a means of constructing and achieving independent selfhood. Their engagement with work is a complex one which acknowledges its dehumanising possibilities while allowing a construct of work as a liberating force, which allows women to achieve material and personal independence. Delafield makes use of the flexible middlebrow cultural space to engage with a variety of cultural constructions of work and examine the diverse and ambiguous meanings of work for the women who people her novels.

There has been more critical engagement with the representation of the woman writer in middlebrow fiction. Nicola Humble considers such characters to be “invariably highly professional, very successful and extremely modest about their work”, with Delafield’s Provincial Lady typifying this description.⁵⁹⁰ This is, Humble argues, in contrast to the representation of male novelists as typically “critically successful but callow and uncommercial”; the contrast “indicates a sense among middlebrow women writers that their own work was judged differently from that of men, but also that a new and lucrative market had opened up for specifically female fiction”.⁵⁹¹ Humble’s argument suggests that middlebrow women writers were representing their own work as something separate and specific within the literary marketplace. The idea of a developing industry sector of women’s middlebrow writing strengthens the connections between Delafield’s representations of

⁵⁸⁶ Arthur Pollard, ‘Introduction’ in *The Representation of Business in English Literature* ed. by Arthur Pollard (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2000) pp1-7 (pp2-3)

⁵⁸⁷ Allan Simmons, ‘The Early Twentieth Century: Uniformity, Drudgery and Economics’ in *The Representation of Business in English Literature* ed. by Arthur Pollard (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2000) pp99-135 (pp99-100)

⁵⁸⁸ Simmons, p106

⁵⁸⁹ John Morris, ‘Mid-late Twentieth Century: “An Unprecedented Moral Quagmire”’ in *The Representation of Business in English Literature* ed. by Arthur Pollard (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2000) pp137-182 (p142)

⁵⁹⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p35

⁵⁹¹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p36

writers and those of women undertaking paid work, especially as the latter are normally involved in clerical or quasi-domestic activities. Delafield's clerks and writers are engaging in forms of work that have become identified as acceptable and normal careers for women, and also in which women might well be able to achieve success or advancement. This acceptability both maintains palatability for the conservative reader and allows Delafield to construct arguments in which women's work is commonplace and unexceptional rather than pioneering. Moreover, her women characters are often creating their own work, as writers, business owners, or employees with an entrepreneurial approach; they are constructing the space and conditions for their work in much the same way as Delafield herself is helping to construct the middlebrow as a space for her own work.

Faye Hammill argues that Delafield's "view of writing [is] as a profession, whose prerequisites are simply intelligence, commitment and fresh ideas, and whose primary goals include economic profit, permits a conception of the author as everywoman", a conception which goes some way to democratise the status of the writer and open up the possibility of this work to a greater number of women; the emphasis on "economic profit" connects her representations of writers to those of other women working for money.⁵⁹² Hammill suggests that the Provincial Lady's literary work becomes part of her domestic duties, since her financial success allows her to provide for her family; consequently, the "work of writing becomes an addition to her existing burden of caring for her family".⁵⁹³ However, Delafield does not simply oppose domesticity and literary work; "domesticity is also presented as something that can nourish creativity".⁵⁹⁴ By weaving together the literary and the domestic, and by emphasising that her protagonists are writing for money, Delafield moves literary endeavour away from notions of art for art's sake and towards the realm of the commercial and the materialist, towards the middlebrow.

Work, marriage and selfhood: *Faster! Faster!*

In this 1935 novel, Delafield describes the conflicts and dilemmas that arise when a wife and mother has a separate career outside the home. Delafield assumes certain feminist positions regarding women's paid work, but maintains a middlebrow political ambiguity by allowing traditional views of women's roles to emerge throughout the novel, through characterisation, context and plot. Conservative anxieties about the suitability of women's work are also expressed in the novel; these anxieties may also have been Delafield's own. Delafield's daughter Rosamund Dashwood recalled "asking Delafield, 'is [*Faster! Faster!*] all about you?' and her mother answering 'Yes.'"⁵⁹⁵ Maurice McCullen sees this "unrelievedly bleak" novel as Delafield's own "harsh personal reassessment and the projection in fiction of character traits she disliked in herself".⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹² Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p193

⁵⁹³ Hammill, p188

⁵⁹⁴ Hammill, p188

⁵⁹⁵ Maurice L. McCullen, *E.M. Delafield* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), p87

⁵⁹⁶ McCullen, p87

The dominant reading of this text is extremely negative in respect of women's work, involving tragic outcomes for Delafield's worker-protagonist and her family. However, I argue that Delafield also advances in this book explicit, if marginal, feminist arguments in favour of women's work; these arguments become legible because of Delafield's sustained creation of ambiguous meaning throughout the novel. This ambiguity differs from that of earlier texts in which alternative meanings emerge but are dependent on the reader's political sympathies or attentiveness to irony; instead, alternative meanings are given in plain view but have a subjugated position in the text in relation to the dominant negative narrative. Delafield's use of ambiguous meaning, in the context of the novel's negotiations between marriage, motherhood, business and the domestic, constructs work as a model of middlebrow cultural space: work, too, is a space in which the dominant narrative may be negative or troubling, but it is also a space in which other, more positive narratives are legible.

The novel describes the last few months in the life of entrepreneur Claudia Winsloe, who has run her own successful business, the London Universal Services agency, for some years; her husband Copper has been unemployed since the end of the First World War. Claudia is a martyr to her work who dramatises herself as the main support of her husband and three children. The first section of the novel sees Claudia working through an August holiday weekend, during which she is reunited with an old friend, Frances Ladislav, lately widowed and returned to live in England after many years abroad. She also finds time to frustrate a love affair between her elder daughter Sylvia and Andrew Quarrendon, a middle-aged don and friend of Claudia's, and to refuse her younger daughter Taffy's request to go to stay with Claudia's sister Anna in America. Claudia is repeatedly confronted by her family and friends about her obsessive, ego-driven work ethic, but she rejects their criticisms. The second part of the novel describes office life; Claudia is taking on more and more work, and when a member of her staff has to take leave, she tries to absorb this too. Copper Winsloe is offered a job, but it comes with the requirement to invest capital in the business, and Claudia is lukewarm about the opportunity. Anna confronts Claudia, arguing that she is deliberately trying to prevent Copper taking the job. The next day, exhausted after her quarrel with Anna and from overwork, Claudia drives to visit her son at boarding school, but is killed in a collision with a tram before she leaves London. A brief coda shows Copper doing well at his new job, Sylvia happily keeping house for him but also writing to Andrew Quarrendon, and Taffy on her way to America. Maurice, Claudia's son, is comforted by Frances; Copper is also becoming fond of her. At the office, the work of the agency continues.

The novel establishes complex representations of women's work. Paid work is shown as inescapable for most women, and this is linked to the prevailing economic conditions; Frances Ladislav sees with surprise that more women are "working so hard" and relates this to the financial

climate.⁵⁹⁷ Claudia herself started her business out of financial necessity (54). For her business partner Sal and the women who work for her, work is a normal and expected part of life, and there are no patriarchal voices raised against the notion of women working at all. Only Mrs Peel, Claudia's mother, provides any sustained contrary argument, and she is characterised throughout the novel as old-fashioned in her manners and attitudes. Paid work outside the home is, in the context of the novel, a necessity for women, at least until marriage; the novel's insistence on this necessity helps normalise the notion of such work. However, the novel also engages with the idea that work outside the home, for a married woman and a mother, is problematic and socially disruptive, and this argument is constructed through the character of Claudia herself.

A straightforward reading of the narrative of Claudia's story in the novel – a journey through egotism, marital conflict, inadequate mothering, and social isolation to her eventual death – yields a highly conservative effect in which the novel expresses trenchant criticism of the wife and mother who undertakes paid work, and in which death is an appropriate retribution for her trespass beyond the boundaries of accepted social roles. However, I argue that Delafield's text establishes an ambivalent reading of women's work, with a negative reading dominating a more positive reading: one is the conservative reading noted above, and the other emerges through marginal and subversive narratives of the impact of work on marriage, motherhood, and individual subjectivity.

Through a consideration of Claudia's relationship with her husband Copper, Delafield examines the idea of equal marriage, in which both parties work, that was posited by feminists such as Vera Brittain. Claudia's position as the main wage-earner in the family has soured her relationship with Copper, who has been unemployed throughout their marriage and "just lives at home" (9). He is entirely dependent on Claudia for money, something that makes him "sick with impotent fury" (55). He can be hostile and abusive to his family; his bad temper can cause the "whole atmosphere of the room" to change, while Claudia deals with Copper as if she were "dealing, kindly and wisely, with a spoilt child – and indeed, it was as a spoilt child, and a disagreeable one, that Copper showed in his wife's drawing-room" (25-26). Prematurely aged yet immature, emasculated by his wife's career, and chronically short of money, Copper exemplifies the imbalance of power in the Winsloe marriage. Delafield allows Claudia some awareness of these problems:

It's almost impossible to make Copper happy, nowadays. He's got nothing to do – that isn't his fault, any number of men are in the same boat – and he sees me earning all the money, such as it is – and the place is mine, really, of course – though I try never to let him feel it. I don't see how he can help minding. Only, it takes the form of making him ungracious – unkind even. I'm sure that somewhere, somehow, I've made a dreadful mistake in our relationship. (35-36)

Delafield explicitly links the lack of harmony in the Winsloe marriage to the financial power Claudia achieves through her work, which has allowed her to assume the traditionally male patriarchal role.

⁵⁹⁷ E.M. Delafield, *Faster! Faster!* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1936), p9. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

Given Copper's characterisation in the first part of the novel as unpleasant and unemployable, Claudia's excessive commitment to her work, born out of genuine economic need, becomes more understandable, as does her position within the family; Copper is unable to undertake his traditional gender role, so Claudia is obliged to accept it. Claudia is characterised as autocratic and domineering in her marriage, as much as Copper is characterised as childish and difficult; early in the novel, however, it is possible to read their behaviours sympathetically, as emerging from difficult circumstances beyond their control. The turning point in their marriage occurs when Copper gets the chance of a job; Claudia seeks to dissuade him from pursuing this, clinging to her position of power and insisting that she can continue to support the family alone (255). Other characters, including Copper, argue for a more evenly balanced marriage in which both might work and take their "fair share of responsibility" (255). Claudia's sister Anna, however, sees that Claudia will never accede to this:

You don't, in your heart, want Copper to get a job at all. I know you say you do, but actually you're doing every single thing in your power to prevent it – and if he does get it, you'll never rest content until you've wrecked it. (276-277)

The drama of Claudia and Copper's relationship articulates an argument in favour of a more egalitarian form of marriage. Claudia has usurped Copper's position as breadwinner, and Copper resents his dependent status, but Claudia is damaged and eventually destroyed by her need to maintain her power. Delafield's narrative suggests that whichever gender takes on the role of patriarch, it is not good for either party. Women are constrained by a gender role that wants to confine them to the home, but Claudia's story shows how they would be equally constrained if placed in the role of breadwinner. The narrative posits a more egalitarian alternative, a combination of work and home life for both. Through this narrative, Delafield brings an ambiguity to the novel's censure of Claudia; she can be criticised for her rejection of feminist egalitarian marriage as much as for her role as the usurper woman who assumes a patriarchal position. These two strands of censure maintain palatability for the reader, whether opposed or sympathetic to married women working outside the home. Despite the dominant negative reading of the Winsloe marriage, Delafield offers a marginal alternative reading in which social and economic circumstances contribute to their problems alongside Claudia's egotism and desire for power. By maintaining this alternative narrative, Delafield complicates the reader's judgement of Claudia and her actions, and ensures that ambiguity about the source of the Winsloes' unhappiness persists, however much the narrative of punishment through death suggests Claudia's sole culpability. This ambiguity also extends to the representation of the impact of Claudia's work on her marriage. Claudia is, to some extent, justifiably devoted to the hard work that makes her agency a success, since Copper has no job and no private income. No character in the novel, apart from her old-fashioned mother, a character faintly ridiculed throughout the narrative, is seriously opposed to her working at all. It is not work itself, but rather Claudia's determination to maintain a position of power from which she can fulfil her need to see herself as "Atlas supporting the world", that is problematic for Claudia's

marriage (276). Delafield constructs the space of work as a neutral and ambivalent space that can be productive or harmful depending on the attitudes of those engaging with it, equivalent to her construction of the middlebrow cultural space as one of complex ambivalence in which literary and political meaning may be negative or positive depending on the attitudes and position of the reader.

Faster! Faster! was published in the context of the general social and political opposition to the working mother discussed above. Claudia Winsloe's relationship with her children is the means by which Delafield explores this opposition within the novel. Claudia "adores" her children, but her relationships with them evince her characteristic lack of insight:

[S]he'd always, as a mother, been so very careful not to dominate her children. She'd let them make their own decisions, choose their own friends, live their own lives. She herself had just worked for them – was working for them still.

They knew it, and their love and admiration and trust was her reward. (60)

The key word here for Claudia is "admiration". She is fonder of Sylvia and Maurice than of Taffy because they are "so touchingly impressed by [their] mother's position as bread-winner for the family" (201). In fact, as the narrative makes plain, she has very little real understanding of even her favourite child; Maurice anxiously hopes "to get a scholarship, and it wouldn't be so frightfully expensive for Mother, and she wouldn't have to work so hard all the time", but Claudia appears to be quite unaware of his concern (48). She is also "profoundly" shocked, "as if something had struck her, hard and unexpectedly", when Sylvia chooses not to confide that she has fallen in love (125-126). The physicality of this shock emphasises the extent of Claudia's self-deception about the effectiveness of her mothering. The plot of the novel sets up conflicts between Claudia and her daughters over their hopes for the future, and Claudia demonstrates the falsity of her belief that she does not dominate her children, breaking up Sylvia's love affair and refusing to allow Taffy to travel to America. Neither daughter hopes to emulate Claudia's career: as Sylvia confides, "I know I ought to work. But I'm afraid really, I'd have liked to live at home and do nothing. The kind of life girls were expected to lead when Mother was young would have suited me beautifully." (42) Similarly, Taffy wants to go to study in America partly to avoid Claudia's fate: "I won't marry an average Englishman and lead the kind of life that Mother's led, and work myself to death for the sake of my husband and children." (105) Claudia's belief in herself as a good mother is typical of her self-deception; the facts of her relationships support conservative positions opposing mothers working outside the home. The narrative also suggests that being a bread-winner is easier than being a good mother and running a home, allowing a potential reading in which motherhood and domesticity are valorised over the world of work. Delafield does, however, complicate this through the general characterisation of Claudia as egotistical and self-deceiving, making a reading possible in which it is not Claudia's work, but her fundamental character, that makes her an unsatisfactory mother.

In support of a positive reading of the working mother, Delafield sets up a marginal but radical counter-argument through the narrative of Mrs Ingatestone, a widow obliged to work for Claudia to support her daughter. The narrative is sympathetic to her position as a working mother:

Since nothing in the world except Diana [her daughter] was of the slightest importance to Mrs Ingatestone, she would have had no hesitation in throwing up her job, at whatever inconvenience to her employers, if to do so would have benefited Diana.

But on the contrary. It would have cut off their sole income, and would have made smaller the already small chance of getting another post later on. (226)

This short description of Mrs Ingatestone's thoughts and motivations can be read as an argument in favour of the working mother. Delafield presents Mrs Ingatestone's prioritisation of her daughter as a normal aspect of motherhood, but she also shows how this prioritisation can improve employee loyalty and efficiency; Mrs Ingatestone's need to support her daughter counters her inclination towards the "short-term" attitude to work assumed of women during the interwar period. However, this argument in favour of working mothers is couched within a conservative view of maternity as women's primary, traditional role; it is because women are mothers that they make good workers.

The novel again evokes support for the working mother when Mrs Ingatestone returns to work, delighted to be "once more in possession of her desk, her files and her telephone extension" and full of "determination to show Mrs Winsloe how grateful she was, and how ready to set to work" (261-262). While Delafield makes use of Mrs Ingatestone's story to establish pro-feminist arguments in favour of the working mother, these arguments are not polemical. Mrs Ingatestone is mildly ridiculed in the text for her "short, thick hair, dyed a disastrous canary colour, and a rather mauve face coated in white powder" (4-5), her "condescending" manner and her "terrific outbursts of temper" (210); the narrative does not present her as exemplary. The fact that Mrs Ingatestone needs to take time off to deal with her ill daughter takes account of concerns that working mothers, and women in general, would prove unreliable employees; Claudia, indeed, voices the hostile view of the working woman: "Private lives first, and the job second", although she is more sympathetic when the full extent of the daughter's illness is explained to her (232-234). While Delafield counters this hostile view through Mrs Ingatestone's commitment to her work, the plotline develops ambiguously. Delafield not only establishes an ambivalent narrative position around the principle of working mothers, but also, through her characterisations of Claudia and Mrs Ingatestone, establishes ambivalence around the individual characters she uses to articulate different political arguments about the desirability of mothers working outside the home. Delafield develops the middlebrow ambiguity that characterises many of her novels into a multi-layered and complex ambivalence in order to represent a particularly conflicted political and social issue for a middlebrow readership. As with the relationship of work and marriage, work itself remains an ambivalent space which may, or may not, foster good mothers; the impact of work on a woman's mothering, and of her status as mother on her work, may be positive or negative, depending on

circumstances and the individual's approach. The good working mother is advanced as a radical possibility, enabled by Delafield's ambivalent representation of paid work and its relation to domestic life, while the negative impact of work on mothering is acknowledged and represented.

The novel is also ambivalent about the development of individual subjectivity and interiority through work. Claudia is presented as deliberately avoiding full self-knowledge, and her excessive devotion to her work is a means of effacing interiority rather than achieving it. Delafield repeatedly exposes Claudia's own need to present herself as the sole support of her family, and the limited extent to which she recognises this need. Interrupted at work by her mother, she is relieved to get back to the task, though "acutely aware of backache, eye-strain, and nervous exasperation. She was aware also, although much less consciously, of having lived up to her own ideal of a woman achieving, by sheer force of will, the next-to-impossible" (87). Claudia has some awareness that she is performing a role rather than acting authentically; however, Delafield also demonstrates the boundaries of Claudia's self-awareness. Claudia believes that she has a thorough and candid self-knowledge; she repeatedly asserts that she is brave and unflinching about "facing facts"; and at the outset of the novel is deeply disturbed when, during a parlour game, she is given a low score for honesty, an event which "rankled queerly in her mind" (73-74). For Claudia, honesty consists of her performance of frankness in front of others; through Andrew Quarrendon, the novel offers a more acceptable definition of honesty as "the contrary of self-deception. Knowing one's true motives" (73). The novel emphasises Quarrendon's own thorough knowledge of his true motives when he is "torn between his passionate love [...] and his own unshakable inner certainty that marriage, shackling his freedom and crippling his powers of work, was not and could never be what he wanted" (181). Having established a model of self-knowledge, Delafield's narrative repeatedly makes explicit the extent to which Claudia deceives herself, refusing to acknowledge her authentic emotions or even actual bodily sensations such as fatigue:

An occasional pang of self-pity might from time to time overtake her, when she realised that she was tired, that she was working to the limit of her capacity and beyond it, and that her married life was not a happy one. Claudia told herself that she knew these passing weaknesses for what they were and was not deceived by them. Her clear-sightedness, she felt sure, was beyond question. (59)

The use of the word "realised" implies that these emotions and sensations have authenticity and that Claudia is to some extent aware of this; however, she is determined to refuse interiority, constructing instead a persona based on what she has "told herself" and characterising real feelings as "passing weaknesses". Delafield's description of her "clear-sightedness" as "beyond question" is ironic; Claudia's clear-sightedness *is* beyond question because it is almost non-existent.

The other characters in the novel, especially the other female characters, recognise and articulate Claudia's essential inauthenticity: Anna frankly confronts Claudia about her self-image: "It's this awful picture that you've built up of yourself in your own mind, as a breadwinner, and a wife, and a mother – and it's all artificial and unreal. It never goes below the surface for one minute" (140). Frances reflects that she finds Claudia "so competent, so brave and splendid and

hard-working, and yet at the same time gives one an impression of – what is it – instability?” (135). Frances is used as an observer and commentator for much of the first section of the novel; this position enables Delafield to confirm and support the depiction of Claudia’s self-perception. Claudia’s limited self-awareness and her self-deception are ultimately fatal for her; denying her fatigue and persuading herself she is fit to drive leads directly to her car accident. Her determined superficiality and performed, constructed selfhood connect Claudia to the middlebrow narrative discussed in Chapter 3 in which interiority is refused and rejected; Claudia is presented as almost incapable of understanding her interior self, and entirely focused on the construction of an exterior self through her self-positioning as mother, wife and breadwinner.

However, work is not presented in the novel as a general obstacle to self-knowledge. Claudia’s colleagues at the London Universal Services offer a more positive model of the working woman and a representation of work and the workplace as spaces of liberation and self-fulfilment for women. Delafield emphasises that engagement with paid work need not compromise women’s femininity. Miss Frayle and Miss Collier, Claudia’s clerks, are presented as traditionally feminine in terms of their appearance – both girls “turn themselves out so beautifully” – and their sexuality (263). Miss Frayle, who “danced almost every Saturday night, nearly always with a different man [...] The question of her virginity was sometimes gloomily discussed” (211) is also strongly characterised as sexually attractive and robustly heterosexual:

Copper [...] had retreated downstairs [and was] in conversation with Miss Frayle. A peculiar gift for finding out by instinct the proximity of any man, and immediately entering into conversation with him and keeping him entertained thereby, was known in the office to be one of Frayle’s leading characteristics. (249)

However, Miss Frayle can adapt her behaviour appropriately: “in some indefinable manner she instantly ceased to be a bewitching *bouri* and became instead a competent young worker” (249). This is typical of the narrative’s reiterated insistence on Miss Frayle’s professional competence; Sal Oliver’s view is that “[s]he’s actually a very efficient young woman, although I admit she doesn’t look it” (11). The office staff function as an example of how women can be effective, efficient workers without compromising either their sexual attractiveness or their conformity to prevailing gender roles; this works as a contrast to Claudia, who has not only transgressed gender conformity in her work and her marriage, but is also, as the narrative repeatedly reminds us, starting to look middle-aged, with “much more grey to be seen” in her hair (127). Delafield’s office workers are not, however, merely younger than Claudia; they – particularly Miss Frayle – exhibit, in the office space, a new kind of femininity and sexuality that is more direct and free, and better adapted to the changing social circumstances of Claudia’s life; Miss Frayle can entertain Copper in a way that Claudia never can. Delafield’s characterisation of their attractiveness is rooted in their professionalism – Sal Oliver is “slim, upright, good-looking [with] an air of finish about her” (6) – and this suggests that the female homosocial workplace, rather than inhibiting sexuality and limiting

its expression in dress and manner, enables women's self-expression. Delafield explores this freedom further by the language she chooses for her characters' interactions.

In the office, Miss Collier and Miss Frayle make use of colloquial language, including some mild swearing: Miss Frayle in particular is prone to this, frequently declaring that things are "hell" and once referring to Mrs Ingatestone as "the old bitch" (220). Formal conversation within the office team insists on the use of the honorific, but Miss Collier and Miss Frayle refer to each other and their colleagues by surname only. The women-only environment of the office also appears to support frank discussion of potentially sensitive issues; Miss Frayle announces "it's me for Marie Stopes every time. I hope that woman gets a monument when she dies" (223). Ross McKibbin has written of the bonding effect of sexually explicit and coarse language in the male workplace;⁵⁹⁸ Delafield's choice of language and conversation for her office workers shows how the workplace enables them to step out of traditional female gender roles and express themselves in ways that are normally forbidden to women. Miss Frayle generally expresses herself in a playful and humorous way: "she blew a kiss with the tips of her fingers to her colleagues, murmuring: 'Exit ballet-queen, featuring as Cupid the Winged Messenger'" (222). Delafield constructs the workplace as a space for women in which they have a greater freedom to express their authentic selves.

The narrative also demonstrates the ways in which the office provides opportunities for companionship and solidarity among women. When Mrs Ingatestone's daughter becomes ill Miss Frayle in particular is very sympathetic, reassuring Mrs Ingatestone: "I knew a child *exactly* like her, only miles worse, and they sent her to Weston for three months and she put on stones" (229). Mrs Ingatestone is welcomed back to the office by her colleagues with thoughtful gifts: "a bunch of sweet-smelling violets, placed there by Frayle, and a little plant growing in a pot – the offering of Collier" (262). Claudia, notably, does not engage in general conversation with her staff or benefit from the social opportunities of work. When Frances, who is unaccustomed to working as well as to modern English manners, comes to help out in the office, she is initially "afraid of the two girls. They looked so young, so competent and assured, and their successful permanent waves, lip-stick and nail-varnish, all combined to give each of them an air of poise that she secretly envied" (224). After a few days in the office, however, she has come to like the office workers, and they have relaxed with her, forgetting

that she was a friend of their employer's, and behav[ing] in her presence very much as they would have done without her [...] The violent language used by the slim, baby-faced Doris Frayle ceased to surprise Frances. From time to time she took part, quite earnestly, in passionate discussions about Miss Collier's weight. (236)

Office life, the narrative suggests, is flexible and welcoming enough to accommodate a new and unfamiliar person, who will benefit quickly from the companionable and supportive atmosphere. Frances also exemplifies how it is possible to derive satisfaction and self-fulfilment from work. Helping out while Mrs Ingatestone is absent, she becomes "attached [...] to her card-index, and

⁵⁹⁸ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p130

enjoy[s] entering up particulars on the cards, and signalling a completed transaction by the affixing of a red paper disc" (236). Frances is able to derive satisfaction, even from relatively simple tasks, when working at the agency, and she intends to continue to do so after Claudia's death. In the novel, Frances can stand for the reader with little experience of, or even antipathetic to, the idea of women working outside the home; the reader experiences with her the initial shocks and the eventual pleasures of the workplace. As Frances is generally valorised as kind and sensible in the text, and opposed to Claudia's more ego-driven motivations, her characterisation mounts another marginal argument in favour of women's work outside the home. Delafield has incorporated a representative of the middlebrow readership into her novel: Frances takes the journey of the reader who is concerned or puzzled by the idea of women's work, but through the experience of work and the warning of Claudia's story, comes to understand that women's work outside the home can be positive. Frances's position in the text can be read as an acknowledgement of the significance of the reader's beliefs and opinions to the construction of meaning in a middlebrow text; by using this characterisation, Delafield is constructing the middlebrow as a cultural space symbiotically dependent on its audience.

Working at writing: *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* and *The Way Things Are*

Delafield makes use of the woman writer as a character in several novels. The early novel *The Pelicans* (1919) features the slightly laughable Bertie Tregaskis, who sells sentimental fiction and poetry to lowbrow magazines. Lydia, in *The Heel of Achilles* (1921), publishes one novel while working as a clerk in London, and enjoys a brief moment in the literary limelight. The protagonists of *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (1930) and *The Way Things Are* (1927) both work at writing in a more sustained way; the Provincial Lady has, at the opening of her second volume of diaries, had some success with her first book, and the novel describes how she goes on to develop her literary life by taking a flat in London in which to work away from her domestic Devonshire setting. Laura, in *The Way Things Are*, lives a similarly secluded rural life; she is married to the uncommunicative Alfred and they live in the country with two young sons. The novel analyses Laura's frustration at her lack of a meaningful emotional life of her own and her tentative love affair with the composer Duke Ayland. Laura has been writing short stories for "the more literary type of magazine" for most of her adult life; her involvement in writing, however, makes a limited contribution to her search for greater self-fulfilment.⁵⁹⁹ As in *Faster! Faster!*, Delafield constructs an ambiguous presentation of the work of the woman writer, her status and her value, and the relationship of her work to her domestic role. Delafield's construction of work as a concept relates strongly to her construction of the middlebrow itself, establishing the idea of the work of the writer as a space that – like middlebrow fiction – can accommodate ambiguous meanings in terms of cultural value.

⁵⁹⁹ E.M. Delafield, *The Way Things Are* (London: Virago, 1988 (1927)), p13

Faye Hammill describes how, in the Provincial Lady novels, Delafield engages with aspects of the debate around the middlebrow and its status through the way in which her protagonist reads and is received as a writer, and her own disavowals of her status as a highbrow or an intellectual.⁶⁰⁰ At the start of *The Provincial Lady Goes Further*, we learn that the Provincial Lady has published a “minute and unpretentious literary effort”; from the outset, Delafield’s protagonist downplays her own literary work and its value.⁶⁰¹ However, alongside this self-deprecation are mild assertions of status and achievement, as well as a persistent ambivalence about literary society and other writers. When relatives express “astonishment at recent literary success” the Provincial Lady notes that this is “needless” (2); when her neighbours belittle her achievement by suggesting that they could also write books she records this with an air of ridicule: “Little things, she says – one here, another there – quaint sayings such as she hears every day of her life as she pops round the parish – Cranford, she adds in conclusion” (4). Delafield’s protagonist, by recording Our Vicar’s Wife’s simplistic attitude to literary endeavour, gently reinforces the idea that writing a book is more difficult than this, and asserts her status as a published author; through her reference to *Cranford*, Delafield may hint at a connection between her own work and that of Mrs. Gaskell, as well as aligning her protagonist with a celebrated – if also domestic – woman writer. Hammill identifies this exchange as “constructing writing as a hobby rather than as legitimate employment”, an implication that further undermines the Provincial Lady’s status as a writer.⁶⁰² The suggestion that writing is a hobby also helps position it within the domestic sphere, opposing a construct of writing as professional work outside the home.

The Provincial Lady is able to hear, directly, the views of her readers, but is often confused by them. One anonymous correspondent asserts that her book is “harmful to art and morals alike” (7) which, as Hammill suggests, implies that she has compromised “aesthetic standards in the interests of high sales”;⁶⁰³ more commonly, her book has proved enjoyable and funny (15). This range of views on her book recollects the range of criticism and appreciation applied to the middlebrow text by its potentially very wide audience; because they are addressed directly to the author, the Provincial Lady is equated with her writing and with the notion of the middlebrow literary artefact. When a stranger tells her that she is “screamingly funny”, the Provincial Lady wonders whether this refers to “my hat, my appearance generally, or my contributions to *Time and Tide*” and the conflation of the author, her work and its cultural status is reinforced (16). However, throughout the novel Delafield also creates a general ambiguity about the value of literary activity.

Delafield frequently exposes her protagonist’s discomfort at literary social occasions, a discomfort that arises from the Provincial Lady’s own anxieties about status and belonging, and from the distaste she often feels for her fellow writers. After each literary social event, the

⁶⁰⁰ Hammill, pp194-197

⁶⁰¹ E.M. Delafield, *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (London: Macmillan, 1939 (1930)), p1. Further references are given in the text.

⁶⁰² Hammill, p187

⁶⁰³ Hammill, p187

Provincial Lady resorts to her diary to criticise the guests. This is sometimes because of their appearance: “dear old friend, Emma Hay, author of many successful plays [...] is wearing emerald green, which would be trying to almost anyone, and astonishing quantity of rings, brooches and necklaces”(31-32). She also finds them rudely prolix, enduring “spate[s] of conversation from several leading lights of literature” (42). She has little confidence in her own status as a writer: “Rose replies [...] that I myself am a Literary Asset to society, nowadays. Pause that ensues in conversation makes it painfully evident that both of us know the last statement to be untrue” (123). The idea of the author as a “literary asset” further suggests conflation of the author and her book, and a similar conflation of their status. The only literary social event she enjoys is the party organised by *Time and Tide*, at which she is to speak; on getting to her feet, she has

serious thoughts of simulating a faint, but conscience intervenes, and I rise. Special Providence mercifully arranges that exactly as I do so I should meet the eye of American publisher whom I know well and like. He looks encouraging – and I mysteriously find myself able to utter. (242)

The Provincial Lady is empowered by being recognised as part of the literary establishment, by a part of that establishment; this recognition enables her to speak. At the end of the evening, she is offered a lift “by extremely well-known novelist, which gratifies me, and hope secretly that as many people as possible see me go away with him, and know who he is – which they probably do – and who I am – which they probably don’t” (243). This phrase exemplifies the Provincial Lady’s sense of her own literary status in the novel, which she seeks both to assert and disclaim. The Provincial Lady’s novel is not characterised particularly as middlebrow within the text, but her position as a writer sometimes aspiring to higher literary status, sometimes repelled by encounters with writers already occupying that position, both endorsed and rejected by other writers, parallels the position of the middlebrow literary novel, aspiring to literary quality while eschewing literary approaches and styles which would define it as highbrow.

In *The Way Things Are*, Laura’s writing is explicitly positioned in the text as of higher literary quality. Her work is praised by a writer who has high status in the context of the novel: A.B. Onslow tells her “that story of yours in the *Century* was a considerable advance in technique over anything that you’ve given us yet. I believe I’ve read everything of yours.”⁶⁰⁴ Onslow’s enthusiasm for her work encourages Laura, but he is constructed as a rather ridiculous figure in the narrative, a man whose hair is “brightly but unconvincingly dyed” and who is taken in by the charms of a superficial and empty-headed flapper (40). This positioning undermines his status as a reliable judge of literary quality, leaving the reader unsure of the status of Laura’s work. Laura herself has ambivalent feelings about her work: “in certain congenial surroundings” she has been “proud” of her writing, but “when elderly country neighbours chaffed her about ‘writing stories with one hand, and pouring out your husband’s tea with the other’” she is “ashamed” of it (14). The text is

⁶⁰⁴ E.M. Delafield, *The Way Things Are* (London: Virago, 1988 (1927)), p43. Further references are given in the text.

ambiguous about the source of Laura's shame, which could arise from the suggestion that she is neglecting her domestic role in order to write, or from the domestic origins of her fiction. Talking to her admirer Duke, she hesitates to claim any literary value for her own work: it is "quite a new idea [...] that my writing matters anything at all" (171). Laura talks wistfully of "a world where books, and writing, and art, are things that matter" (96), but like the Provincial Lady, her excursions into literary society are unsatisfactory, even though they are occasions when Laura "temporarily cease[s] to be a wife and mother, and [becomes] a human being", the two states clearly positioned by Delafield as oppositional in Laura's particular circumstances (37). During another uncomfortable literary party, Laura realises that "none of these talented people had any domestic ties whatsoever" and that they would not be able to do what she has done: "the woman who was sent nearly mad by the bark of a dog and the buzz of the fly could never have produced a Johnnie or an Edward, and subjected her reason to the far greater strain of existence in their neighbourhood" (164). This reference to her children implies a criticism of the woman writer who is not a mother, and an assertion of the status of the mother above that of the writer; given Laura's lack of satisfaction with her maternal role; however, this assertion comes from a defensive position, and so the criticism of women who write is modified and subdued. However, this reflection, as well as both protagonists' discomfort in the company of other writers, helps develop an ambivalent attitude to the status of the writer within these two novels, and contributes to a subversive critique of the idea of the writer as separate, isolated, and special.

Delafield develops this critique in particular through her treatment of the writer's working space. In both of the novels discussed here, the representation of the writer's space contributes to a construction of the concept of the middlebrow within the text. Virginia Woolf famously asserted that a woman must have "a room of her own" if she is to write fiction.⁶⁰⁵ Delafield's representations of the writer's space take account of the difficulties Woolf identifies for the writer who has no "room of her own" but also disrupt the accepted truth of Woolf's statement. Her writers' spaces are often ambiguous and compromised, seeking to separate themselves from her protagonists' domestic responsibilities but invariably connected with the world of the domestic. Her accounts of women trying to write are usually comic, with the struggling author interrupted by the incursions of other aspects of her life; Delafield's comedy subverts and undermines the notion of the author's desk and study as sacrosanct places, but she also asserts that fiction can be written from an ambiguous and compromised place. It is likely that Delafield would have been familiar with the arguments of *A Room of One's Own*, since extracts were published in *Time and Tide* in November 1929, immediately before the first appearance of the Provincial Lady.⁶⁰⁶ Hammill argues that Delafield's protagonist in the Provincial Lady novels "enacts a resistance to the modernist view that true authors belong to a natural elite" by asserting a democratic view of writing as something

⁶⁰⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 (1929)) p4

⁶⁰⁶ Hammill, p185

that any woman with intelligence and resolve can undertake;⁶⁰⁷ Delafield's often humorous depictions of the writer's space also counter Woolf's insistence on a separate space for the writer of fiction away from the demands of domesticity and maternity, arguing instead for a compromised position that allows women to write fiction within the domestic context. Hamill suggests that the Provincial Lady "affirms the value of a room of her own"⁶⁰⁸ by taking a flat in London, but Delafield's presentation of a separate space for the artist remains complex and ambiguous. She offers an alternative location for the woman artist or writer to Woolf's 'room of one's own', one that can exist within domesticity and alongside domestic responsibilities. In *To the Lighthouse*, the artist Lily Briscoe recognises the affinities between her role as artist and Mrs Ramsay's role as a mother, both trying "to make of the moment something permanent".⁶⁰⁹ However, in order to function as an artist she must reject the domestic, wifely role. Not only does she remain unmarried but she is unable to provide the appropriate womanly emotional response to widowed Mr Ramsay: "She ought to have floated off on some wave of sympathetic expansion: the pressure on her was tremendous. But she remained stuck."⁶¹⁰ Delafield's women writers would be able to respond appropriately in this situation, even if they resented the demand for sympathy as much as Lily. Delafield's fictions of the woman writer suggest that total separation from traditional roles is not essential for the woman artist, arguing instead for a negotiated, often short-term, separateness that may be mental rather than physical, and which is unlikely to be fully defensible against the demands of the domestic.

The representation of the writer's space in *The Way Things Are* is similarly complex and ambiguous. Writers who are precious about achieving total silence, or complete seclusion, are the objects of mockery and compared unfavourably with Laura, who can only write "when I can – generally in the evenings after the children have gone to bed," but has still been able to produce work of literary value (96). Laura is privately scornful of the author who ensures seclusion by ensuring that "there are double doors to my room, and no one is allowed to come near it until after twelve o'clock" (163): when Laura sits at her own desk, it is to write to the butcher for "two pounds of scrag-end" (93). Disturbed by her governess, who gives "a respectful glance at the writing-table", Laura "instinctively [draws] the blotting paper across the postcard", trying to maintain the impression that she is producing literary work; with her governess, she seeks to maintain the status appropriate both to her position as employer and as a professional writer (94). But when Duke interrupts her, saying he hopes she is writing because he wants to see "a real live author at work", Laura disclaims the epithet and confesses that she is "writing to the butcher" (96). This conversation takes place in the early days of their attraction for each other and Laura's frankness is probably intended to charm; by disclaiming her authorial status she also avoids the possibility of

⁶⁰⁷ Hamill, p185

⁶⁰⁸ Hamill, p185

⁶⁰⁹ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Granada, 1977 (1927)), p151

⁶¹⁰ Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, p142

compromising her sexual attractiveness by appearing as a woman who has a role outside the domestic. Her honesty about the postcard also allows her to expose to Duke the emotional poverty of her life and her hopes that he might remedy this. However, the postcard to the butcher is almost the only text we see Laura writing at her desk; the events of the novel work against the assertion that it is possible to write effectively from a domestic setting. Laura's literal writing space is, ironically, never used for writing, and her figurative writing space is gradually eroded as her emotional life occupies it.

The Provincial Lady's attitude to her writing space is, in some ways, less ambiguous. She recognises that, at the family home, "literary projects [are] entirely swamped by hourly activities concerned with children, housekeeping, sewing, letter-writing, Women's Institute Meetings, and absolute necessity of getting eight hours' sleep every night", although presumably her first book has been written under these circumstances (217). Her Bloomsbury flat is, ostensibly, the place where she can "get some writing done" (217); however, London is "one round of gaiety" and the Provincial Lady feels "extremely guilty on receiving a letter from Our Vicar's Wife, saying she is sure I am working hard at a New Book" (230-231). Like Laura, the Provincial Lady also finds her writing time taken up by domesticity. One afternoon's work in London is interrupted by paying the laundry bill, a man wanting to clean her telephone, and a window cleaner who is not only distractingly noisy but also manages to break a window and cut his arm, leaving her with a "perfectly blank sheet of paper waiting to receive masterpiece" (271-274). Delafield's irony repeatedly exposes her protagonist's ambivalent motivation in using her money to pay for a London flat. She is escaping rural domesticity not only to build her writing career, but also to enjoy her London life; she is engaged in the performance of a writer's life, seeking in London the recognition that she cannot achieve in Devon, and taking part in the ancillary and social aspects of the role of the published writer. These activities in fact predominate over the activity of writing; the novel contains a single instance when the Provincial Lady is inspired to "sit and write all the evening vigorously" (245). Her London flat and social life enable the Provincial Lady to better imagine herself as a professional author and to enjoy a literary lifestyle that is not necessarily connected to actual literary work. Delafield's emphasis on her protagonist's performance of the role of lady-writer undermines slightly the value and status of this work; this may allow a reading of such work as unthreatening to traditional gender roles, and helps mitigate potential conservative criticism of the Provincial Lady for leaving her home and domestic responsibilities to come to London. The Provincial Lady is unable to shut out the social and the domestic from her life in order to write; she may have a room of her own, but she cannot use it to escape her other responsibilities to focus on writing. Her writing career occupies a negotiated space between and connected to domesticity and literature, London and the country, marriage and independent living; like the middlebrow, it is a hybrid construction, adapted to the circumstances that surround it.

Both Laura and the Provincial Lady are explicit about the need to earn money from their writing. This links both texts, and their representations of writing, to the Leavisite conception of

the middlebrow as emerging from the economically driven literary industry. However, as Hamill suggests, financial success means that writing “need no longer be considered a frivolous distraction from [...] duty to husband and family”.⁶¹¹ Being able to earn real money from writing justifies the activity for the domestic woman, even if writing also allows the protagonist to achieve other, less tangible satisfactions. Both characters use the income from their writing to support their domestic lives, and this in turn links the representation of writing women to the middlebrow interest in the material details of domesticity. It also connects Delafield’s writing women to her other representations of working women; Claudia Winsloe supports her family with her earnings. However, the criticism of Claudia is much more overt than criticism of the Provincial Lady, suggesting that, to the interwar reader, writing is a more tolerable form of employment for the fictional wife and mother. The representation of writing as being for money emphasises a link between literary endeavour and the material; however, as both women seek to use their income to improve the quality of their life and to create conditions in which they can write more, the position of writing is ambiguous, balanced between materialism and quality in much the same way as the middlebrow can be constructed.

One of the ways in which both protagonists use their income is to buy freedom from some of the responsibilities of domesticity. For the Provincial Lady, this comes in the form of her London flat. As discussed above, her surprisingly large first royalty cheque (“Wildest hopes exceeded”) allows her to rent a “very small flat in London” (6); once she has found one, she finds herself to be “startlingly independent” of the claims of domesticity (120). When the Provincial Lady is asked, by a “quite important daily paper”, to write an article about “Modern Freedom in Marriage” she initially thinks that they have “made a mistake, and think me much more celebrated than I am”, but is persuaded by the “surprisingly handsome fee” to take the job, as the money will allow her to “give a dinner-party, pay several bills, get presents for the children, take them abroad in the summer holidays, send Robert a cheque towards pacifying the Bank, and buy myself a hat” (267). This short shopping list indicates how Delafield’s protagonist is holding her domestic responsibilities in balance with her own social desires – the dinner party is her most urgent consideration, and the powerful gesture of sending money home to her husband comes some way down the rankings – but it is notable that she continues to use her income in part to support the family even while it also helps her to temporarily escape from it. The reference to a new hat also suggests that Delafield is downplaying the importance and possibly the amount of money her protagonist is earning from her writing; spending some of it on a hat hints at pin-money. However, this is a misdirection of the reader; her earnings must be substantial enough to fund her London flat. By suggesting traditionally feminine and frivolous uses for the Provincial Lady’s money, Delafield mollifies potential concerns that her protagonist is achieving an excessive financial

⁶¹¹ Hammill, p189

independence which enables her to give money to her husband, disrupting traditional gender roles in marriage.

In *The Way Things Are*, Laura hopes that income from writing will resolve the servant problem: “If she wrote more stories, and could sell them for better prices, she might be able to afford the wages asked by highly trained nurses and governesses.” (137) Specifically, Laura hopes to afford better staff to liberate her from the demanding task of caring for her children; this is linked to her craving for a deeper and more fulfilling emotional life. This desire is explicitly connected to her position as a mother: Laura may remind herself that ““A woman may live for her children”” but she is also aware that she is not able to do so; a paragraph later she expresses her desire for “a life – an emotional life – of her own”(8). Delafield again deals with Laura’s search for liberation ironically; her abortive love affair occupies so much space in her life that her writing fades from view, and is barely mentioned in the final third of the novel. Laura’s literary and personal ambitions are undoubtedly aspirant, and undoubtedly fruitless.

The novel offers an alternative, slightly idealised vision of the feminine writer in Christine, Laura’s sister, who is “entirely independent [...] She earned money, too, by her writing. She lived in London in a very small flat, by herself. Every year, and sometimes twice in a year, she went abroad” (70). Christine encourages Laura to travel (74); she also advises her to respond to Duke’s admiration (103). Christine is also characterised as relatively sexually liberated: she knows “many young men” in London (70), love affairs come “naturally” to her (139) and she speaks frankly about matters such as birth control that Laura finds awkward (73). However, Christine’s “aghast” tones, when she discovers that another young woman has gone to live with a married man, mitigate the suggestion that she is involved sexually with her many admirers (197). Christine may have greater erotic freedom than Laura but she uses it judiciously, becoming engaged at the end of the novel to “one of the richest commoners in England” (143). Laura reflects that Christine has “kept her head” and entered into an advantageous marriage “without earnestness, without illusion and without emotion” (296). The narrative rewards the modern Christine, with her frank attitudes to sex and love, even while it punishes Laura; at the end of the novel, having renounced her lover and knowing her love will fade when she cannot see him, she

admitted to herself that the average attributes only, of the average woman, were hers [...] It dawned upon her dimly that only by envisaging and accepting her own limitations, could she endure the limitations of her surroundings. (336)

Laura aims to accept her own ordinariness; the idea of herself as writer disappears from her self-image just as much as the idea of herself as Duke’s lover. Instead, she will devote herself to the daily round of “the house, the ordering of the meals, the servants, the making of a laundry list every Monday – in a word, the things of respectability”. Laura’s escape from her emotional distress back into the world of the ordinary and the respectable implies that her writing will have no place in this. The conclusion of the novel affirms that writing is a slightly raffish, unsuitable activity for a wife and mother, and suggests that any form of work that takes a woman away from her domestic role is

unsuitable. But it also emphasises the discontinuity of women's work; as soon as Laura decides she must be unexceptional, she is reverting to a norm that makes her position as a published author untenable. The end of the novel is not as definitively tragic as that of *Faster! Faster!*, but Laura's future is undoubtedly bleak. The novel's conclusion subverts its earlier assertions that good writing can emerge from the domestic environment.

Delafield's fictions of women's work and women workers are the location for her negotiations with the idea of the middlebrow and its value and status, contributing to a construction of the middlebrow as a positive space for feminist literary expression, but also engaging with the middlebrow's problematic and often negative cultural status. Delafield constructs a model of work in her fictions that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the various demands on women's lives, and their own desires for material and subjective independence. But it can also prove oppressive and limit women's scope for personal development and growth, or allow women to avoid fuller self-knowledge. The work itself is constituted as separate from both 'real' men's work and from the purely domestic sphere, occupying an intermediate space that is both connected to and separate from traditional gender roles and occupations; it is also a space that has been established by the efforts of her worker-protagonists themselves. In terms of feminist advancement, work is presented as an ambiguous concept, which may foster or constrain feminist ambition just as it fosters or constrains individual women. It is also a space which is constructed and made meaningful by the attitudes and opinions of those who participate in it; Delafield's worker-protagonists, like middlebrow readers, establish and debate the significance of work for women through their engagement with work as a concept and as an artefact. Her workers who are also writers challenge the accepted conventions of the professional role of the writer but also acknowledge the difficulty of reconciling literary and domestic responsibilities. Delafield's depictions of writers and office workers alike counter the binary opposition of the world of work and the world of home, creating a hybrid space in which paid work and domestic responsibilities are interrelated and interdependent. Like her working characters, Delafield is, through her fictions of work as an ambiguous space, developing the notion of the feminist middlebrow cultural space, a space that throughout her novels both allows and limits the expression of feminist meaning and argument. In developing her fictions of women's work, she is also contributing to the development and understanding of the middlebrow as a cultural concept.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have undertaken a critique of texts from the full range of E.M. Delafield's published fiction in order to interrogate the interaction of two defined categories, feminism and the middlebrow. I identified Delafield's fiction as positioned within a new category, that of the feminist middlebrow. I defined this category as one which enables the expression of feminist meaning, and the identification of opportunities for women beyond normative domestic roles, within a literary category that is normally, in terms of both form and content, conservative in its effects; I have linked this to earlier critical work on the ability of middlebrow fiction to carry dual or multiple meanings and effects as it seeks to appeal to a wide-ranging audience. I argued that this new category would be a relatively small sub-set of the category of the feminine middlebrow, and that its boundaries could be tested by works that offer implicit or explicit feminist critique of social conditions without positing alternative ways of living for women, and by writers who produced works that would fit well within the category, and also works that would not meet the definition I have suggested. I demonstrated that Delafield uses various formal approaches to construct allusive, marginal or subversive feminist meaning throughout her fiction while also maintaining a generally dominant conservative narrative which both maintains readability for a conservative audience and partially obscures Delafield's more radical meaning; this argument drew on theories of the significance of the reader in constituting a text's position as middlebrow, showing that the feminist position of the reader is essential to the expression of feminist meaning in Delafield's novels. I argued that these formal approaches to the engagement of the reader constitute an authorial strategy through which Delafield helps to construct and define the category of the feminist middlebrow. I added to the critical understanding of the category of the middlebrow, demonstrating how it can be used to create possibly incongruous radical political meaning within the context of a dominant conservative narrative, and extended the understanding of the significance of the middlebrow reader to the definition of both the cultural status of a text and its political meaning.

In my research, I posited Delafield's own feminist position as strongly aligned to the equality feminism of the interwar period, drawing on her journalism and autobiographical writing as well as her biography to establish this. I explored the impact of Delafield's professed feminism on her writing and its categorisation as middlebrow, and evaluated the effect on feminist meaning of writing for a middlebrow audience. I interrogated how feminist meaning can be expressed and detected in middlebrow fiction and the formal literary strategies that both enable and detract from such expressions. I evaluated the relationship between Delafield's fiction and the social, historical and political contexts in which it was published. I discussed the possibility of establishing the category of the feminist middlebrow and considered how Delafield's fiction contributes to its construction and definition, showing how Delafield offers in her fiction not only a feminist critique

of the circumstances of women's lives, but also suggests or hints at possible alternative ways of living for the interwar woman. Drawing on a close reading of selected novels, I argued that Delafield's formal approach establishes often deliberate textual ambiguity, which allows the construction of marginal feminist meaning within texts which have a dominant conservative narrative. I analysed the ways in which Delafield constructs such ambiguity: these include her flexible use of the boundaries between fiction and autobiography; the use of allusion to establish lesbian meanings in her texts and the use of lesbian characters to distract the reader from other more disruptive lesbian possibilities; the use of irony and characterisation to establish and then obscure a feminist critique of mother-daughter relationships in the patriarchal family; and the construction of women's paid work as an analogy for the category of the middlebrow itself. I also suggest that, throughout her work, an ambiguous approach to the construction and maintenance of female subjectivity is maintained, repeatedly asserting and then effacing the possibility of the self-articulating female subject; this iterative inscription and erasure is also to be detected in Delafield's expressions of feminist meaning. I demonstrated that, despite her ambiguous approach, Delafield's expressed feminism is not a diluted middlebrow feminism; rather, her marginal and subversive expressions sustain radical as well as mainstream feminist ideas. I identified the complexities and contradictions of Delafield's feminist meanings, and the relationship of those meanings to her social, historical and political environments. I argued that Delafield makes strategic use of formal approaches, including irony, allusion, distraction and an ambiguous representation of the construction of subjectivity, in order to stimulate an intersubjective reader response to her feminist meaning which will allow the attentive sympathetic reader to understand her feminist meaning, while the conservative reader is able to disregard it. This intersubjective approach maintains pleasurable reading for a middlebrow audience holding a range of political opinions while allowing feminist meaning to be constituted.

I have attempted to build on the work of Nicola Humble, which establishes the category of the feminine middlebrow, in order to posit and evaluate the category of the feminist middlebrow. I have extended the scope of previous critical works on Delafield by considering the feminist import of her fiction; this contributes to the challenge made to Maurice McCullen's ambivalent presentation of her feminism by Rachel Mather, Alison Light and Faye Hammill, and contributes to a fuller construction of Delafield's position as an interwar feminist writer. The majority of existing critical work on Delafield has focused on the *Provincial Lady* novels and by expanding the range of texts selected for discussion in this thesis I have extended critical understanding to Delafield's lesser-known works, including several texts that have not previously received any sustained critical attention; throughout my consideration of these texts I have sought to deepen and extend critical understanding of her formal approaches and strategies to the creation of feminist middlebrow fiction. I have extended the existing work done by Humble, Hammill and Melissa Sullivan on the contribution of middlebrow authors to the construction of the middlebrow category, demonstrating

the ways in which Delafield constructs and defines this category through her formal approaches to the development of ambiguity in her fiction.

Delafield produced a substantial body of writing and inevitably there has not been space within this thesis to consider all aspects of her literary work or all of the novels she wrote, although I have attempted to select novels that are strong examples of the themes I identify for critical interrogation. There are a number of other dominant themes in her work, including class, heterosexual courtship and marriage, the spaces of London, the provinces and the suburbs, domestic service and working-class women, and the representation of children, that I was not able to explore within the scope of this thesis. I was also unable to give space to Delafield's extensive journalism or to the propaganda work she undertook during the Second World War. While the thesis does take account of Delafield's use of humour and irony, it was not possible to take account of all her humorous writing, especially the short comic pieces produced for newspapers and magazines, which constitute a significant part of her published work.

The concept of the category of the feminist middlebrow could usefully be further explored to consider other writers whose work might fall within this category, and the formal approaches they use to express feminist meaning in a literary category that retains an overall tendency towards conservatism. Similarly, the placing of Delafield's work within the feminist middlebrow category could be tested by further thematic investigations of her fiction and by detailed analysis of her journalism and its reception. Other middlebrow texts might also be evaluated to see whether Delafield's approach of creating ambiguity around her radical political meaning is a common feature of middlebrow texts engaging with anti-conservative politics.

Delafield's ambiguous approach to the expression of feminist meaning, and her frequently conservative resolutions of her heroines' dilemmas, can be both satisfying and frustrating for the feminist reader; however, Delafield's intersubjective approach both privileges and empowers the reader to construct and understand feminist meaning in her text, allowing for democratic participation in interwar feminist debate. As well as making feminist ideas available in unexpected places, Delafield's commitment to continuing the realist project of nineteenth-century fiction enables her to construct narratives of women's lives that are sympathetic to the realities of those lives, giving them value and meaning. Delafield's democratic, critical and always profoundly realist engagement with feminist ideas may ultimately be as effective as any polemic.

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