

'THE BOOK HELD ME LIKE A VISIT FROM AN AMUSING, VALUED FRIEND': THE INTER-WAR
MIDDLEBROW NOVELS OF E. M. DELAFIELD AND E. H. YOUNG

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the perceived identification between reader and central character in a selection of E. M. Delafield's and E. H. Young's inter-war novels. These domestic middlebrow novels cleverly seduce the reader into believing that the world they are presented with in the book is real life. The authors mirrored their readers in the creation of their characters and so the reader is absorbed in an expertly contained and controlled aspirational fantasy. The authors encourage their reader's identification with the characters in a variety of means which are examined through close textual analysis. A key source of information in this study comes from contemporary criticism, reviews and debate. This thesis returns to the material history of the middlebrow, examining archival magazines and journals as well as the literary criticism from the period.

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'The book held me like a visit from an amusing, valued friend': The inter-war middlebrow novels of E. M. Delafield and E. H. Young¹

The following poem was sent to *Time and Tide* and was published in their 4th October 1930 edition:

To The P L.
And shall we learn again at last
How all these many weeks have passed
With you and Robert and the others?
And whether Barbara Carruthers
And Crosbie hit it off together?
And if you've had this *dreadful* weather?
And whether you have gone to tea,
Since last you wrote, with Lady B?
Have you got any more in debt?
Has Helen Wills had kittens yet?
And, if so, what did Robert say?
Nothing? I hope so, anyway!
Where will the bulbs be put this year,
Upstairs or down? – We long to hear,
Dear Madam, what you have to tell
About the place we know so well.
There may you find good health and pleasure –
And tell us of them at your leisure.²

The poem was prefaced with the words, 'I send these verses of welcome'. The welcome was in regards to the second in the Provincial Lady series by E. M. Delafield. At the conclusion of the first series, *Time and Tide* received the following letter:

SIR, - In this household the Diary of a Provincial Lady is a much relished item of TIME AND TIDE; we do not at all like the idea of saying good-bye to her, and supplicate for

¹ Emily Newell Blair, "Emily Newell Blair Recommends Some Rattling Good Stories," *Good Housekeeping* 88.6 Jun. 1929: 196.

² George Van Raalte, "Letters to the Editor," *Time and Tide* 11.40 4 Oct. 1930: 1232.

more. ... I should, therefore, like to ask you, Sir, kindly to convey to Miss Delafield, the thanks and appreciation of ANOTHER P.L.³

This is just a sample of the fan mail the serial received. An article in *Time and Tide* stated that the Diary had attracted, 'perhaps, more comment and appreciation than any other serial published here'.⁴ The serial consists of diary entries from a fictional woman who lives in a village in Devonshire, with her husband Robert, and two children. In her diary she recounts and reflects on various aspects of her daily life, including her interactions with family, friends, neighbours and servants, with an amusing, often ironic tone.

The popularity of Delafield's Provincial Lady series is evident from these quotes. Readers responded to the characters to an extraordinary extent. The poem quoted previously is written to the diarist and conveys the writer's eagerness to know what the characters have been up to during the months in which the serial was not written. He behaves as if the characters are real people whose lives have been continuing during the hiatus, to the extent that he enquires if they have had the same weather he has. He asks question after question, interrogating the diarist for information. It is a very cleverly written poem, full of inside jokes and references that only an avid follower would understand, and the use of the plural 'we' implies the wider community of fans who 'long to hear' about the place they 'know so well'. It is evident that, as an article in *Time and Tide* declared, the Provincial Lady 'has, through her diary, become the intimate friend of hundreds of people'.⁵

What is particularly interesting is how these writings from fans articulate the way readers perceived identification with the central character. The previously quoted letter

³ Another P.L., "Letters to the Editor," *Time and Tide* 11.28 12 Jul. 1930: 899.

⁴ Anonymous, "Books," *Time and Tide* 11.51 20 Dec. 1930: 1609.

⁵ Anonymous, 1609.

asking for more instalments is signed 'Another P.L.', that is, another provincial lady. The fan considers herself to be living a similar life to the diarist, and she was not alone in her belief. In a review of a later book in the series, C. E. Bechhofer Roberts writes, 'Miss Delafield's Provincial Lady has long been a joy to me, whose daily life is cast in much the same sphere though without the same refuge in humorous reflection'.⁶ It is this easy and enjoyable identification with the characters that made middlebrow domestic novels, such as these, so popular. Readers delighted in seeing what they thought was a reflection of themselves and their lives in the novels.

These domestic novels are easy to read, but they are also deceptively clever. The reader is seduced into thinking that what they are presented with is real life. The characters in Delafield's and E. H. Young's books live in the modern world and they are lifelike enough to be identified with, but they are not quite real. They are a bit too clever and a bit too witty to be the reader, but this makes them all the more fun and attractive, and the reader is flattered into thinking that they, too, are like that. In this way the reader is absorbed in an aspirational fantasy which is very cleverly contained. It is not an obvious fantasy, such as those in romance novels, where the reader knows it is unrealistic and they must kid themselves into believing it. The fantasy in these domestic novels is more mature and is cunningly hidden by the carefully constructed world of the novels. The authors encourage their reader's identification with the characters through a variety of methods, and this is what I will explore in this study. A key source of information for this comes from contemporary criticism, reviews and debate. In this thesis I am returning to the material

⁶ C. E. Bechhofer Roberts, "New Fiction," *Time and Tide* 15.38 22 Sep. 1934: 1167.

history of the middlebrow, examining archival magazines and journals as well as the literary criticism from the period. There has recently been a resurgence of interest in the middlebrow and I will also refer to more recent academic research and opinion, but only in order to support or expand on my arguments.

The rest of this introductory chapter focuses on the term middlebrow and its relationship to the already existing lowbrow and highbrow. I trace the history of critical thought on the term and the books it encompasses, and whilst considering why and how the genre came about, I seek to define it. This is not an easy task, as it is extremely difficult to classify middlebrow novels. Nicola Humble, in her important study *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (2001), writes, “‘middlebrow’ and ‘highbrow’ are far from impermeable categories, and many texts shifted their status from one to the other, or were uneasily trapped in the no-man’s land in-between’.⁷ This was true both at the time and in the years after. Some texts, which, upon publication were considered by the academic elite to be highbrow, became too popular for their liking and so were rebranded middlebrow. Conversely, many texts which were originally classed as middlebrow, have since been elevated in status by academics and are now studied alongside modernist novels. As middlebrow author Rose Macaulay wrote in *Time and Tide*, ‘no one agrees with any one else about brows’.⁸

The middlebrow has been a contentious issue from the birth of the term right through to present day. Critics do not even agree about the first use of the word. Humble points out

⁷ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 26.

⁸ Rose Macaulay, *Time and Tide* 16 Jul. 1936: 1089, quoted in Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 75.

that there was a need for the term before it was created, and states that ‘the first recorded example (according to the *OED*) occurs in the *Daily Express* 17 June 1928’.⁹ However, two other academics claim ‘the first identified use of the term in print was in *Punch*, 23 December 1925’.¹⁰ It is unknown who coined the term or when it came into common usage. It is therefore as difficult to pinpoint the genesis of the middlebrow as it is to define it.

The word middlebrow was created long after highbrow and lowbrow, which, according to Anthea Trodd, were concepts ‘well established by the 1890s’.¹¹ There had been no need for a middle term until ‘the coming of modernism concentrated the attention of the avant-garde on the novel’.¹² The highbrow ‘coalesced with modernism’ which created a need to distinguish between the radical reworkings of the novel and more conventional fictional narratives.¹³ The books encompassed by the term middlebrow were not new types of literature. They were the continuation of the nineteenth century novel. It was the labelling of them that was new, and along with this label came a strong tone of derision.

After the First World War ‘the status of the realist novel was dramatically altered’ by the new focus of the highbrow.¹⁴ The realist mode was deemed old-fashioned and was re-classed and relegated into the middlebrow bracket. Highbrow authors sought to distance themselves from this traditional form but many other writers chose to continue with it, and so “the battle of the brows” was begun. The core of the fighting appears to have been

⁹ Humble 10.

¹⁰ Erica Brown, “Introduction,” *Working Papers on the web* 11, 2008, 19 Jan. 2010 <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/Brown.html>>. Date also referenced in Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-39* (Providence; Oxford: Berg, 1993) 10.

¹¹ Anthea Trodd, *Women’s Writing in English: Britain 1900 – 1945* (Harlow: Longman, 1998) 47.

¹² Humble 11.

¹³ Trodd 11.

¹⁴ Humble 11.

between the highbrow and the middlebrow. The lowbrow seems to have kept out of it and is only called upon to be an ally rather than to start a fresh fight. The main reasons behind the hostility were authors' opinions of what made good literature. Highbrow authors argued that their experimental style was the new form of it and the old realist mode was no longer considered relevant in the modern age. Whereas middlebrow authors viewed the highbrow's works as 'esoteric' and remote from many readers.¹⁵ Both points of view can be argued, however there is a great deal of evidence to support the middlebrow authors' claims. Highbrow literature was not widely read and Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith suggest in the introduction to their anthology, *Middlebrow Moderns* (2003), that highbrow authors envied and resented middlebrow authors' popular success.¹⁶ This appears to be a large part of what fuelled the three main attacks on the middlebrow by the highbrow.

The first of these was Q. D. Leavis' 'highly influential polemic', *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932).¹⁷ As Erica Brown explains, Leavis 'sought to scientifically examine public taste in reading, but she brings to bear on her study the full weight of an increasing pessimism and paranoia among the cultural elite'.¹⁸ Leavis was very concerned that the majority of the reading public were not reading the right kind of books. Through her research into reading habits she discovered 'the supremacy of fiction and the neglect of serious reading', and although she was not opposed to fiction, what was read was 'seldom what is considered by the critical minority to be the significant work in fiction'.¹⁹ It is clear right from the start that

¹⁵ Bracco 124.

¹⁶ Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, eds. *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003) 10.

¹⁷ Brown.

¹⁸ Brown.

¹⁹ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932) 4 & 5.

Leavis was heavily biased, but she was also prone to gross hyperbole. After ascertaining what was being read, she made, what was to her, a most shocking discovery. The reading public were consuming far too many of the wrong kind of books. Twice she makes the extreme claim that 'the reading habit is now often a form of the drug habit'.²⁰ Leavis lays the blame for this sorry state of affairs at many doors. She accuses lending libraries, middlebrow newspapers and journals, advertisers, book clubs and women in general, because they were the ones who frequented the library and therefore it was their responsibility to 'determine the family reading'.²¹ It is true that these organisations had a great deal of influence over the growth of the middlebrow and its popularity. Later in this chapter I will be looking at them and their role in more detail, but from a positive rather than a negative viewpoint.

Throughout her study Leavis criticises middlebrow books for 'giving the public what it wants'.²² According to her they want 'something merely readable', 'fiction that requires the least effort to read and will set the reader up with a comfortable state of mind'.²³ Leavis abhorred the bestseller status, arguing "best seller" is an almost entirely derogatory epithet among the cultivated'.²⁴ She states that a book becomes a bestseller because 'it offers ideal companionship to the reader by its uniquely compelling illusion of a life in which sympathetic characters of a convincing verisimilitude touch off the warmer emotional responses'.²⁵ This she disapproved of, and she disliked the readers' 'expectation of meeting

²⁰ Leavis 7.

²¹ Leavis 7.

²² Leavis 27.

²³ Leavis 24 & 27.

²⁴ Leavis 34.

²⁵ Leavis 58.

recognisable people in fiction' and blamed that for their 'failure to respond to the finer novels'.²⁶ Many of Leavis' arguments against the middlebrow pinpoint the reasons for its popularity. Her study also offers the most in-depth exploration of the middlebrow during the period of its growth and success, and her explanations of it will prove useful to this study.

Everything Leavis disliked about the middlebrow is that which was the opposite of the highbrow. Highbrow novels did not achieve the bestseller status, and so she argued against such status. Highbrow novels are not often populated with lifelike characters, and although the authors were attempting to present a more accurate world in their novels, their style of writing made them largely inaccessible to most readers. Highbrow novelists were artists experimenting with new styles and they could not compete with popular novels. Much of Leavis' resentment seems to be fuelled by that fact.

The attack on the middlebrow that is most frequently quoted in books on the topic is Virginia Woolf's essay 'Middlebrow' (1942). It was composed in the same year as Leavis' book, as a letter to *The New Statesman*, but it was never sent and was not published until ten years later. It was written in response to a radio talk by middlebrow novelist J. B. Priestley, in which he attacked highbrows.²⁷ In her essay, Woolf begins by defining a highbrow and a lowbrow and then says, 'but what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer'.²⁸ Her definition of a middlebrow is given in the same style as that of a highbrow and lowbrow, but it is a negative and much more

²⁶ Leavis 60.

²⁷ Trodd 49.

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow," *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 155.

hesitant version of it. Her previous definitions are given with confidence: 'Now there can be no two opinions as to what a highbrow is', and 'By a lowbrow is meant of course ...'.²⁹ Her uncertainty over the middlebrow is therefore powerfully suggestive. She remarks of the typical middlebrow book that 'it is not well written; nor is it badly written. It is not proper, nor is it improper – in short it is between betwixt and between'.³⁰ Woolf cleverly makes the middlebrow out to be the unwanted intruder with nothing to offer and no purpose. She finishes her letter with a strongly worded expression of her hatred of the middlebrow: 'If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat, or half-crushed worm dares call me 'middlebrow' I will take my pen and stab him, dead'.³¹

George Orwell is the third writer whose opinions of the middlebrow are often quoted, although his views were much less vicious than Leavis' or Woolf's. He, like Leavis, considered that people were reading too much 'trash', professing to be shocked, in his essay 'Bookshop Memories' (1936) at the voracious appetite of some clients.³² However, in his later essay, 'Good Bad Books' (1945), he discusses middlebrow authors and admits, 'there has been a whole series of writers ... whom it is quite impossible to call 'good' by any strictly literary standard, but who are natural novelists'.³³ He even confesses to having been 'amused or excited or even moved' by such books.³⁴ He therefore accepted that although, in his view, they may not be literary, they did have a right to exist and deserved their popularity.

²⁹ Woolf 152 & 153.

³⁰ Woolf 156.

³¹ Woolf 160.

³² George Orwell, "Bookshop Memories," *Essays* (London: Penguin, 1984) 27.

³³ George Orwell, "Good Bad Books," *Essays* (London: Penguin, 1984) 319.

³⁴ Orwell, "Good Bad Books" 320.

The denigration of the middlebrow can be traced back to the highbrow writers and, according to Joan Rubin, Woolf's opinion was so influential that her association of the middlebrow with 'the corruption of taste ... reverberated through every subsequent discussion of the term'.³⁵ It appears that the disparaging remarks made by highbrow writers such as Woolf, influenced academics against these novels, and the influence has persisted through the decades. Even now, when middlebrow texts are beginning to be reconsidered, some shy away from using the term middlebrow. They seek to either replace it with a new term, or they attempt to separate certain writers from the contamination of it. However, there are some academics who are championing the middlebrow and are strongly in favour of retaining and making use of the term. Brown writes of 'the importance of interrogating, rather than dismissing the value-laden category 'middlebrow'', and Humble argues that it is 'crucial to retain the sense of cultural boundaries that dominated contemporary thinking about literature'.³⁶ Humble dislikes the use of retrospectively applied terms such as modernism and para-modernism, as 'it brings us no closer to seeing the literary map of the time as contemporaries would have seen it'.³⁷ My study is also concerned with the contemporary view of the middlebrow, and so I will adopt Humble's suggestion.

As Leavis helpfully identified, the popularity of the middlebrow can be clearly seen by the increased use of libraries, the creation and subsequent growth of book clubs and the reviews and adverts for middlebrow novels in the press. Leavis blamed these organisations for causing the popularity of the middlebrow, however, without the success of middlebrow

³⁵ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) xiii.

³⁶ Brown; Humble 25-6.

³⁷ Humble 25.

novels these organisations would not have survived or flourished as they did. They sustained each other by mutual popularity.

There were different libraries for different classes of readers. Boots catered for middlebrow readers whilst the more expensive London lending libraries such as Mudie's and Day's served the highbrow reader. 'By the mid-1930s it [Boots] was the largest circulating library of its kind, with over four hundred branches and half a million subscribers'.³⁸ Their turnover 'gives some impression of the level of demand: 25 million volumes were exchanged among Boots libraries in 1925 and 35 million by the time of the outbreak of the Second World War'.³⁹ Leavis' claim that 'many subscribers call daily to change their novels' may not have been an exaggeration.⁴⁰

Humble writes that along with circulating libraries, 'the other major new institutions of literary influence of the day [were] – the book club and the 'Book of the Month' recommendations of the daily newspapers. ... The book clubs in particular were extremely powerful institutions'.⁴¹ The Book Society, established in 1927, and the Book Guild, in 1930, were both imitations of the American sensation, the Book-of-the-Month Club, which began in 1926. Janice Radway's in-depth study of the American Book Club, *A Feeling for Books: the Book-of-the-Month-Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997) began, she writes, because 'I wanted to know more about the divergences in the ways people acquired, read

³⁸ Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983) 10.

³⁹ Clare Hanson, "Marketing the 'Woman Writer'," *Writing: A Woman's Business: Women, Writing and the Marketplace*, eds. Judy Simons and Kate Fullbrook (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 67.

⁴⁰ Leavis 7.

⁴¹ Humble 43.

and used books'.⁴² Leavis had a similar motive, although hers was fuelled by a desire to expose the brainwashing of the public. Leavis argues that 'the majority has its mind made up for it before buying or borrowing its reading', and she is horrified by the prospect that through book clubs, 'middlebrow taste has thus been organised'.⁴³ She notes that 'by December 1929 the society had nearly seven thousand members and it is still growing'.⁴⁴ It is therefore clear that book clubs were an immediate success and they catered unashamedly for middlebrow readers. The Book Guild were described, in their July 1930 *Bulletin*, as 'an organisation which would cater for the ordinary intelligent reader, not for the highbrows'.⁴⁵ Once a book was chosen by a book club, or was selected as 'Book of the Month' by a newspaper, it was an instant bestseller. Delafield published her provincial lady series in book form and the first volume was chosen by the Book Society as their Book-of-the-month for December 1930. This fact was then included in adverts for the book, as evidenced in the 13th December 1930 issue of *Time and Tide*.⁴⁶ This emphasises the persuasive power of the book clubs in directing readers.

All of Delafield's and Young's novels received positive reviews and many were included in published lists such as best books of the year, books for Christmas presents and library lists. They were extremely popular writers, but, like many middlebrow authors, they are now relatively unknown. I am focussing my study on their novels published between 1920 and 1938, by which time both authors were more mature and experienced writers. Due to

⁴² Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: the Book-of-the-Month-Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 23.

⁴³ Leavis 22 & 24.

⁴⁴ Leavis 23.

⁴⁵ *The Book Guild Bulletin*, quoted in Leavis 24.

⁴⁶ *The Diary of a Provincial Lady*, advertisement, *Time and Tide* 11.50 13 Dec 1930: 1581.

the limited word count I am unable to analyse all of their novels, so I have chosen a representative selection of their works. I will study Delafield's novels *Tension* (1920), *The Heel of Achilles* (1920), *The Way Things Are* (1927), *What Is Love?* (1928), *The Diary of a Provincial Lady*, *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (1932), *Thank Heaven Fasting* (1932), *The Provincial Lady in America* (1934) and *Faster! Faster!* (1936). Alongside these I will study Young's novels *The Misses Mallett* (1922), *William* (1925), *The Vicar's Daughter* (1928), *Miss Mole* (1930), *Jenny Wren* (1932), *The Curate's Wife* (1934) and *Celia* (1937).

I am not aware of a personal connection between Delafield and Young, but that is not necessary for this study. Delafield did read and admire Young's novels. Part of her review of Young's *The Curate's Wife* is published on the inside cover of the Jonathan Cape edition and in her review of that book in *Now and Then* (Winter 1934), Delafield 'does not hesitate to identify herself as part of a fan club'.⁴⁷ Both authors wrote for *Time and Tide* and *Good Housekeeping*, 'publications directed at middle-class women and/or the middlebrow reader', and they were reviewed by the same journals and newspapers, suggesting they shared the same readership.⁴⁸ It is their impact on and relationship with this readership, through their novels, that I am interested in. In the next Chapter, I examine the relationship between reader and central character and study how the authors create it. Both authors employ a number of clever techniques to control the reader's responses and to draw them in to relationship with specific characters. In some cases the connection is so strong that it leads to the total absorption of the reader into the world of the novel, and subsequently, as with the previously quoted poet fan of *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, the belief that the characters

⁴⁷ Briganti and Mezei 88.

⁴⁸ Briganti and Mezei 78.

are real. This supposed reality of the characters and the world in the novel is very important to the integrity of that relationship. The authors ensure that throughout the book the reader identifies with the characters without realising that such identification is a fantasy.

The relationship between the reader and the central character influences the reader's opinions of and connections with the books' other characters. It also affects the reader's view of the relationships between characters, and this is the topic of Chapter three. The manner in which the reader is introduced to the other characters, and the way in which those characters are referred to, has a major impact on the reader's perceptions. I analyse how the authors present the characters to the reader and I also consider how the reader is controlled and sometimes deceived by the central character.

The study comes full circle in the final chapter, which explores the relationship between the characters and their books. In creating their characters, the authors mirror their readers in a number of ways, some of which will have been highlighted in previous chapters, but a key aspect is in their characters' interactions with books. Many of the characters are avid readers and make reference to actual novels and characters. They also compare themselves to book characters as well as fantasising about being the heroine of a novel. These references serve many purposes, including the strengthening of the bond between reader and character and enhancing the verisimilitude of the text.

I have chosen to link these authors together as there are many similarities in their writing. There are certain techniques they both employ and the effect of their novels on the

reader is very similar. By placing Delafield and Young alongside each other I can explore this, whilst positioning them within the wider issues and writings of the period.

Chapter Two

‘It is all very much like daily life, seen through amused and consciously critical eyes and recorded with wit and an unflinching sense of fun’.⁴⁹

As Leavis explained so well, middlebrow books owed most of their popularity to the fact they are ‘readable’ and contain ‘sympathetic characters of a convincing verisimilitude’.⁵⁰ Delafield and Young excelled at writing novels matching these criteria, and their chosen sub-genre of the domestic novel offered an ideal setting for their skills to be exercised. In domestic novels, Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei explain, authors devised ‘fictional worlds that mirrored the lives of their readers. Women became the subject and avid recipients of a fictional world that paid realistic attention to detail and the everyday’.⁵¹ Plot and action are not the main concern of domestic novels. They focus on ‘the everyday, the minute and the familiar’ from the point of view of realistic characters.⁵² Many of the reviews of Delafield’s and Young’s novels highlight both authors’ talent for this. The characters ‘speak the language of every day’.⁵³ ‘One recognises flesh-and-blood’.⁵⁴ ‘It is all very true to life’.⁵⁵ It is precisely because their novels are about ‘ordinary life’ and the characters are ‘so life-like’ that the readers enjoyed them so much and made such a connection with them.⁵⁶ As one

⁴⁹ Marjorie Grant Cook, “New Novels,” *The Times Literary Supplement* 3 Nov. 1932: 810.

⁵⁰ Leavis 24 & 58.

⁵¹ Briganti and Mezei 17.

⁵² Briganti and Mezei 17.

⁵³ Angela Thirkell, “New Novels,” *The Times Literary Supplement* 1 Dec. 1932: 920.

⁵⁴ Gerald Gould, “New Novels,” *The Observer* 2 Sep. 1934: 8.

⁵⁵ Marjorie Grant Cook, “New Novels,” *The Times Literary Supplement* 18 Dec. 1930: 1084.

⁵⁶ Marjorie Grant Cook, “The New Novels,” *The Times Literary Supplement* 27 Nov. 1937: 909; J. C. Squire, rev of *The Heel of Achilles*, by E. M. Delafield, *The Observer* 24 Apr. 1921: 4.

contemporary critic confirms, 'one reads, and enjoys!'.⁵⁷ Readers saw themselves in the books and could relate to the characters. Emily Newell Blair, the book critic for *Good Housekeeping*, encouraged her readers as such: 'this lady lives in our day. She is, in fact, just such a woman as you or I'.⁵⁸

Delafield and Young employed a variety of techniques to establish this relationship between reader and central character. Right from the start the reader is specifically positioned so that when they are introduced to the main character, the author can control the reader's responses. In almost every case the first person the reader meets is the central character, and in Young's case, this is almost always the person named in the title. Young is therefore setting up her reader's expectations before they even open the book. Interestingly, her titles went through revision. Her choice of them and the changes she made are telling, for example, *The Curate's Wife* was initially called *Dahlia*.⁵⁹ Both titles refer to the same central character, however the final title changes Dahlia's position. Some of her power is taken away as she is referred to in the possessive form, as belonging to a man, rather than as her own person. Dahlia is an extremely strong and independent character, and it is partially because of this that she struggles in her new position as a wife. The final title reflects that struggle and also places Cecil, Dahlia's husband, in the centre of the action, as the possessor of Dahlia. The working title for *Celia* was 'Middle-Age' and, had Young kept that title, it would have significantly changed the way the reader perceived the

⁵⁷ Gerald Gould, "New Novels," *The Observer* 29 May 1932: 6.

⁵⁸ Emily Newell Blair, "Emily Newell Blair Chooses Sixteen Books to Suit as Many Kinds of People," *Good Housekeeping* 94.1 Jan. 1932: 164.

⁵⁹ Briganti and Mezei 124.

novel.⁶⁰ The reader's expectations and focus upon opening the book would have been very different. The book does encompass all of Celia's extended family, who are in middle-age, but Celia is the central character, and the final title supports and establishes that. The titles of Delafield's novels are more about the themes of the books, for example *Tension*, *The Way Things Are* and *What is Love?*. These titles also direct the reader's focus and set their expectations, as they describe the state of mind of the central character and so place the reader in their position. Both authors therefore used their book's title to aid them in positioning the reader.

When one of Young's novels is opened, the reader often finds a reference to the central character within the first sentence. For example, her novel *Celia* begins:

Celia Marston was standing on a wooden stool and looking out of the high-set window. From the floor in this attic flat, nothing could be seen through the window except the sky and now it had the blue depth of a brilliant day at the end of March. Little clouds moved across it, like white-clad ladies of infinite leisure strolling on an azure lawn in the first real warmth of the year. Celia loved the sun and she loved the view from the top of this tall house, so she had mounted the stool and saw, straight in front of her but a long way off, the high ground above the village of Easterly stretching, almost level as a wall top, against the sky.⁶¹

In this way Young introduces the character and immediately positions the reader alongside them. The reader receives the character's view of their world, through the narrator, who is in the privileged position of knowing the character intimately. Within the first few lines of each of Young's novels the reader learns certain key facts about the character and is gently persuaded that they are now on intimate terms with them.

⁶⁰ Briganti and Mezei 131.

⁶¹ E. H. Young, *Celia* (London: Virago Press, 1990) 9.

Delafield's novels have more variety. Some begin in the same way as Young's, but she also experimented with different writing styles. *The Way Things Are* begins with a conversation between Laura and her husband Alfred. The first words that are spoken are from Laura, the central character, and the dialogue, along with the narrator, swiftly provides the reader with an understanding of the couple's relationship and personalities.

"Did I tell you what Johnnie said, after he'd had his reading-lesson to-day?"

"No."

Laura embarked upon her anecdote.

She had not intended, nor even wished, to tell it. She knew well that her husband did not want to hear it.

Nevertheless, she told it. ...

When the recital of her son's witticism had petered out, Alfred Temple said, "H'm," compromising between a short, unamused laugh and a curt ejaculation, and then he and Laura were silent again.

They had been married seven years.

Every evening after dinner they sat in the drawing-room, or, on those rare summer evenings when it was hot, in the garden, and Alfred talked not at all, and Laura, in spite of almost frenzied resolutions to the contrary, found herself preparing to talk.⁶²

Delafield was very economical with her words. She chose them wisely and ordered them deliberately to send a clear message to the reader. The use of the words 'again' and 'every' convey the repetitive nature of the couple's lives and the reader can sense Laura's dissatisfaction with 'the way things are'. The unusual and amusing placing of the negative in 'Alfred talked not at all', is telling in its description of Laura's husband. Delafield sets up the reader's expectations by saying 'Alfred talked', and then dashes them with the 'not at all'. Delafield's spacing is also significant. The sentence, 'They had been married seven years' is deliberately separated from the rest of the text. This allows time for the reader to

⁶² E. M. Delafield, *The Way Things Are* (London: Virago Press, 1988) 1.

acknowledge the sentence and, perhaps, nod understandingly. In this way Delafield cleverly sets the tone for the rest of the book and immediately sides the reader with Laura.

In *Diary of a Provincial Lady* Delafield employs an altogether different writing style. There is no narrator and no introduction to the characters. The reader is plunged straight in to the middle of the diarist's everyday life. The book begins:

November 7th.—Plant the indoor bulbs. Just as I am in the middle of them, Lady Boxe calls. I say, untruthfully, how nice to see her, and beg her to sit down while I just finish the bulbs.⁶³

And this is how the book continues. 'Diary entries are arranged chronologically, by date, and begin abruptly with whatever sight, thought or emotion is uppermost in the Provincial Lady's mind at the moment'.⁶⁴ This does not, however, impinge on the creation of a relationship between the reader and the central character. Rather it forces an immediate one. The reader is restricted to the diarist's point of view throughout the book and is therefore positioned alongside her. Unusually, the central character in these novels does not have a name. She is the 'I' of the diary and is never referred to indirectly. The fact that she is unnamed assists the reader in identifying with her. She could be them, could take on their name and be expressing their thoughts and witticisms. She is the 'symbolic Everywoman She is never described. Her physical appearance, movements, gestures and other mannerisms are cleverly left to the imagination'.⁶⁵

Once the reader has been introduced to the central character, the craftsmanship of the authors does not stop there. They have to continually ensure that their reader is where they

⁶³ E. M. Delafield, *The Provincial Lady At Home and Abroad* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1935) 3.

⁶⁴ Maurice L. McCullen, *E. M. Delafield* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985) 58.

⁶⁵ McCullen 65.

ought to be and that they perceive things as planned. Young uses her heterodiegetic narrator to fuel the reader's thoughts and manipulate their interpretation of events. She subtly influences the reader through her narrator who is not always objective. At times the narrator slyly tells the reader what to think of characters, for instance, in *The Vicar's Daughter*, the narrator uses the adjective 'childishly' to describe Maurice's thoughts.⁶⁶ This is clearly a subjective opinion, but it would take a very thorough reader to realise and counteract this. Most readers would absorb it quickly and move on, accepting it as truth, and so, in this way, the reader is unknowingly manipulated. Young also employs focalisation, sometimes with multiple characters' consciousnesses. Within the novels Young frequently swaps between focalising characters, as well as between a character and the narrator. This provides the reader with a variety of view points, but it also provides Young with a multitude of ways to influence the reader, and often the switch is seamless and goes by unnoticed. For example, in *The Curate's Wife*, Cecil is the focaliser, then after a brief dialogue, Dahlia becomes the focaliser.

Dahlia's joy at seeing Jenny, the quick intake of breath she had never given him in welcome, and later, the ease with which she responded to the chatter and nonsense of the Tothills and their friends, had thrust him into another world. But he believed his own world was better and while he wished to be where she was, he was naturally prejudiced in favour of her following him to the higher plane at which she mocked.

'This,' said Dahlia, sinking to the hearthrug as he remained gloomily silent, 'is much more tiring than airing sheets.'

'Because you would have been doing that for your sister,' he said sharply.

'I've been slaving for you all day!'

'Because it amused you.'

'Jenny amuses me too,' she said, 'so there's nothing in that.'

⁶⁶ E. H. Young, *The Vicar's Daughter* (London: Virago Press, 1992) 173.

She must put a stop to this nonsense. What were they quarrelling about? She was horrified at the rapidity with which they had slipped into this little dark pit where reproaches crawled like poisonous snakes...⁶⁷

Young is extremely adept at hiding the focalisation, and because she combines it with the realist mode and the traditional omniscient narrator, the reader is presented with a very convincingly realistic world. The reader is therefore very easily able to buy in to the fantasy that these characters exist and live in the real world. As one review put it, 'a novel by Miss E. H. Young is opened in the certainty that it will correspond closely to life as seen by a sensitive observer'.⁶⁸

It can be inferred through her writing that Young was 'a sensitive observer'. Her characters and narrator are very perceptive, interpreting glances and gestures as well as spoken words. As can be seen in the following excerpt from *Miss Mole*.

She could watch Lilla so skilfully varying the warmth of her smile for each new-comer and, by the slight changes in her cordiality, Hannah thought she could judge the worldly position or soundness of doctrine of each arrival.⁶⁹

The characters are also often appreciative of nature and the beauty which can be found in it. The world in which the characters live and the scenes in which the reader sees them are vividly presented, through often poetic language, for example, in *The Misses Mallett*.

The place was beautiful and the sunlight had some quality of enchantment. Faint, delicious smells were offered on the wind and withdrawn in caprice; the trees were all tipped with green and interlaced with blue air and blue sky...⁷⁰

The environment has an impact on the characters. Nature is evocative to them and Young often uses nature to express their emotions, for instance, in *Jenny Wren*.

⁶⁷ E. H. Young, *The Curate's Wife* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1950) 146-7.

⁶⁸ Charles Marriott, "New Novels," *The Manchester Guardian* 12 Nov. 1937: 7.

⁶⁹ E. H. Young, *Miss Mole* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1941) 201.

⁷⁰ E. H. Young, *The Misses Mallett* (London: Virago Press, 1984) 12.

The rain came down heavily as she turned into the road edging the steep wood, it pattered on the leaves which had once waved in joy for her, and Jenny's footsteps lagged. It was right that it should rain, it had never rained before when she went to meet him, and the skies were crying for her because she could not weep herself.⁷¹

The characters see, smell and hear the things around them and the reader is invited to experience it too. The reader walks with the characters through their daily life. The time-span of the books is relatively small as Young never presents a character's whole life. The books begin with an adult character and only cover a few weeks, months or at most a year of their life. The plot does not rush, it moves at the pace of life, thus encouraging the reader's absorption into the fantasy that they live a similar life to the characters.

Young creates some very complex central characters and she is very talented at portraying a particular state of mind, which muses and vacillates. The reader follows the characters' wandering thoughts and due to this insight into their state of mind, they become like real people whom the reader knows intimately. One reviewer described it thus, 'the restrained art of E. H. Young includes the rare gift of being interested more in what persons think than in what the author thinks of them'.⁷² Yet Young is also adept at controlling the amount of information her characters provide to the reader. In *Miss Mole*, Young creates a complicated and intriguing character. Within Hannah Mole there are multiple identities and she chooses which self to have foremost at different times. This gives depth to her character and draws the reader in, yet it also makes Hannah a tricky person for the reader to know. Even though Hannah is the primary focaliser, the reader's knowledge of her is restricted.

⁷¹ E. H. Young, *Jenny Wren* (London: Virago Press, 1985) 347.

⁷² F. W. H., "New Novels," *The Manchester Guardian* 8 May 1925: 9.

‘I’ll come to tea one afternoon. These’, she smiled maliciously, ‘are not my best clothes – but very nearly. My shoes, however’, she thrust out a surprisingly elegant foot, ‘will always stand inspection.’

Mrs. Spenser-Smith gave an unwilling, downward glance. ‘Absurd!’ she said. ‘You’ve no sense of proportion.’

‘Yet I risked this one,’ Hannah pointed to her right foot, ‘without a thought for its beauty. Fortunately, it’s hardly scratched.’ She looked up, her face rejuvenated by mischief. ‘I broke a window with it, Lilla’.

Incredulity struggled with curiosity in Mrs. Spenser-Smith, and curiosity with her determination to deny Hannah the pleasure of thinking herself interesting. ‘Pooh!’ she said lightly, and then her unpractised imagination took a clumsy flight. ‘You don’t mean to tell me that woman had locked you out of the house?’

‘I don’t mean to tell you anything,’ Miss Mole said sweetly, and with the smile on her lips she watched her cousin’s admirable exit which was designed to show the increasing number of people in the shop that she was of very different quality from that of the person she left behind her.⁷³

Hannah purposefully hides things from the other characters, as above, and because she often refuses to even think about her secrets, or only considers them glancingly, they are also withheld from the reader. We see things ‘in snatches, crookedly The reader is kept on the hop, trying to piece together connections, relationships, from glimpses, hints, mysterious jokes and allusions’.⁷⁴ This stimulates anticipation and excitement in the reader and it encourages them to want to know more about Hannah. In another author’s hands this could very well distance the reader from Hannah, but Young is careful. She seduces the reader right from the start and we cannot help but befriend her. As Glen Cavaliero recognised, Hannah’s ‘inner resourcefulness and interest in little things are qualities on which it is both easy and gratifying to pride oneself’.⁷⁵ Readers therefore were flattering

⁷³ Young, *Miss Mole* 20-21.

⁷⁴ Sally Beauman, “Introduction,” *Miss Mole* (London: Virago Press, 1984b) v.

⁷⁵ Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900 – 1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977) 153.

themselves in identifying with Hannah and were buying into the fantasy that Hannah was a real person just like them.

As well as employing secretive focalisers, Young also restricts her reader's knowledge through her choice of focalisers. In *Celia*, the reader is privy to all of Celia's thoughts, we know her better than anyone else as we have access to her secret inner world. Reviewer Frank Swinnerton comments, Young 'takes us well into the labyrinth of a wambling mind'.⁷⁶ However, Young chooses not to allow the reader access to Celia's husband. We therefore do not know him fully and, because we mainly have a one-sided view, the reader learns about him with Celia. 'The choreography of the novel is such that Celia's shocks are ours too'.⁷⁷ Young is extremely skilful at managing her characters and her narrator and limiting the reader's knowledge and access to great effect.

Celia looks at marriage in middle-age, and in it Young displays her 'incomparable skill in laying bare the nuances of relationships'.⁷⁸ Young is adept at presenting a marriage relationship and the intricacies and difficulties that come with that. Her earlier book, *The Curate's Wife*, looks at the early days of married life. It is the sequel to *Jenny Wren* and focuses on Jenny's sister, Dahlia, and her now husband, Cecil. The novel shifts focalisation between Dahlia and Cecil and so 'the reader is placed in the frustrating position of an eavesdropper, privy to both points of view, yet incapable of arresting the couple's deteriorating relations'.⁷⁹ There are also two subsidiary focalisers, the Vicar and his wife. They are at a later stage in married life and Young uses them as a comparison both for the

⁷⁶ Frank Swinnerton, "New Novels," *The Observer* 14 Nov. 1937: 6.

⁷⁷ Lynn Knight, "Introduction," *Celia* (London: Virago Press, 1990) vi.

⁷⁸ Knight i.

⁷⁹ Briganti and Mezei 124.

reader and for Dahlia and Cecil. 'Through closely examining and interposing all four participants' inner consciousnesses, Young astutely reveals the compromises, evasions and power struggles within marriage'.⁸⁰ She gives the characters 'convincing introspection' and conveys their conflicting feelings and ideas.⁸¹

She did not want to see him, rather boyish and endearing, sprawling in a chair much too small for his length and wearing an expression of annoyance which was all for his own shortcomings. She wanted to resist the sympathy he was rousing in her and the desire to set him right with his world. She was reluctant to resign her feeling of alienation for, if it went, she would be more bewildered than he was.⁸²

Much like Delafield after the Provincial Lady series, Young received letters from fans requesting a further sequel. 'Please don't leave us in despair. Such interesting lives ought to be followed up. Yours in pleasant anticipation. Reader'.⁸³ Another fan writes 'that she is left wondering what these characters 'will do next and, above all, wanting to know what happened after you laid down your pen''.⁸⁴ This fan expresses the same belief in the life of these characters as the writer of the verse quoted at the beginning of this study. She acts as if the characters go on living after the book has finished. The supposed reality of the characters and the relationship the reader has with them is further confirmed by a fan who sent 'greetings to the mother of my best friends'.⁸⁵ It appears that many women found comfort and companionship within the world of the novels, which is testament to Young's skill.

⁸⁰ Briganti and Mezei 125.

⁸¹ Briganti and Mezei 125.

⁸² Young, *Curate's Wife* 244.

⁸³ Letter undated, Young Papers, quoted in Briganti and Mezei 88.

⁸⁴ Letter, 16th Oct. 1934, Young Papers, quoted in Briganti and Mezei 88.

⁸⁵ Letter undated, Young Papers, quoted in Briganti and Mezei 88.

Fans of Delafield's books, and not just the Provincial Lady series, felt similarly. Blair writes that *The Way Things Are* 'enables you to meet real people and to know them as you always long to, and as you never know the ones you see every day'.⁸⁶ Both authors provide a depth of verisimilitude and characterisation which enables readers to engage with the central characters. Readers felt the characters were their friends whom they knew intimately. The titles of some of Blair's articles in *Good Housekeeping* suggest readers had a similar reaction to a lot of middlebrow texts. For example, 'If You Are Looking For Friends – Emily Newell Blair Tells You Some Interesting Books in Which They May Be Found' (1927). The fact that this title was given to an article implies that finding friends in books was something that the readers were looking for.

Like Young, Delafield also wrote of the marriage relationship, and in the case of *The Way Things Are*, the story is told purely from Laura's point of view. Similarly to Young's *Celia*, the reader is never privy to the husband's thoughts, and as discussed earlier, the reader is immediately placed on Laura's side. Delafield employs a number of techniques for keeping the reader where she placed them. The narrator has access to Laura's thoughts and feelings, and they are often presented to the reader without explanation or embellishment.

She looked at the clock.

It was nearly half-past nine.

No use pretending that it wasn't worth while to take up her sewing. There was plenty of time before one could think of going to bed.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Emily Newell Blair, "From all the Delightful Miscellany of the Summer Emily Newell Blair Selects a Book for Every Taste," *Good Housekeeping* 87.4 Oct. 1928: 94.

⁸⁷ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 13.

In this way the reader receives Laura's thoughts in exactly the way the character thinks them, there is no intermediary in the way. The reader feels that they have direct access to her.

When Laura's mind is troubled and her thoughts are jumbled, Delafield employs an almost stream-of-consciousness style to portray it.

“A crinoline hat of very palest yellow, and yellow organdie and lace—a slim silhouette—the long amber necklace. ‘Mrs Temple, I’ve always loved your work so much – ’ Duke Ayland standing by the door, watching her.” “She looks so absurdly young!”⁸⁸

Laura's thoughts continue in this way until they reach a climax and she cuts them off, by snatching up her hand-glass and examining her reflection. In this disjunctive medley of thoughts the reader knows what it is Laura is thinking of. Even though we only get snatches and snippets, the reader understands where the ideas and memories of conversations are coming from, and because they are only snippets, the thoughts are more plausible, and the reader feels satisfaction in knowing and understanding Laura so well. If Delafield had offered entire thoughts, or had the narrator explain them, the effect would not be so convincing.

Like Young, Delafield has created a complicated and conflicted character in Laura. She has many different selves which she struggles with and swaps between throughout the book, but towards the end, she manages to acknowledge and be them all at the same moment.

She was, at one and the same time, the sister of the bride, the hostess, together with – strangely – the wealthy Mrs Vulliamy, at a social occasion of some magnitude,

⁸⁸ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 120.

the mother of two little pages, of whom everybody said, "Aren't they too sweet?" and the wife of Alfred Temple, who farmed his own land in the depths of the country. And she was Laura Temple, loving, and loved by, Duke Ayland.⁸⁹

This multiplicity of self is common among women, and would have been even more so at the time, when women with children were still just considered to be wives and mothers and nothing more. Therefore the majority female readership would have completely understood and identified with Laura.

As well as writing, Delafield was also a public speaker. In 1933 she spoke on "A writer's job" at the dinner of the National Liberal Club's literary circle and it was reported in an article in *The Manchester Guardian*. She is quoted as saying that two important parts of her job 'were to observe and to record'.⁹⁰ She said she preferred to present 'something that approximated to one's everyday life'.⁹¹ This is certainly true of her *Diary of a Provincial Lady* series. Her decision to use the diary form was a clever one, as it suggests to the reader that they get an intimate glimpse into another person's life. Alison Light considers that 'diaries capture a sense of the immediate, the undigested, and unfinished (an effect Delafield manages to convey with her abbreviated and breathless style)'.⁹² The reader feels like they are there, sharing the moment with the character. There is a variety of style and language used and the provincial lady's personality comes out through the diary. She includes reminders for herself, for example, '(Mem.: See whether tennis coat could be dyed and transformed into evening cloak.)',⁹³ and notes questions to be pondered. The questions are

⁸⁹ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 305.

⁹⁰ Our London Staff, "A Novelist on the Writer's Job," *The Manchester Guardian* 22 Mar. 1933: 10.

⁹¹ Our London Staff 10.

⁹² Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991) 133.

⁹³ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 70.

written in such a way that it is as if she is speaking directly to the reader, for instance, '(Query: Cannot many of our moral lapses from Truth be frequently charged upon the tactless persistence of others?)'.⁹⁴ In recording her interactions with other people, she is very frank and honest. At times she suffers from the common affliction that her thoughts are separate from her actions. For example, when stuck in conversation with an 'insufferable male novelist', she misses her chance to escape.⁹⁵

He has an immense amount to say about it, and we sit on deck for what seems like hours and hours. He says at last that he hopes he is not boring me, and I hear myself, to my incredulous horror, saying pleasantly No, not at all—at which he naturally goes on.⁹⁶

The Provincial Lady is an inviting character that readers easily identified with and wished to imitate. 'Her standard response to a puzzled questioning of life—"Answer comes there none"—even became in-group slang'.⁹⁷ One of the main reasons she is so attractive is due to her wit. She is constantly ironic and amusing and often jokes to herself in the diary about the people she comes across.

I ask how she is, and she shakes her head and enquires if I should ever guess that her pet name amongst her friends once used to be Butterfly? (This kind of question always so difficult, as either affirmative or negative reply apt to sound unsympathetic. Feel it would hardly do to suggest that Chrysalis in view of the shawls, would now be more appropriate.)⁹⁸

There are also many amusing incidents, for example, at a party she sneaks a piece of candy-sugar into her handbag for her daughter.

⁹⁴ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 25.

⁹⁵ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 215.

⁹⁶ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 215.

⁹⁷ McCullen, 59.

⁹⁸ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 65.

As we take our leave with customary graceful speeches, clasp of handbag unfortunately gives way, and piece of candy-sugar falls, with incredible noise and violence, on to the parquet, and is pursued with officious zeal and determination by all present except myself.

Very, very difficult moment....⁹⁹

Delafield employs 'self-deprecatory humour and irony' and this serves to make the provincial lady even more beloved.¹⁰⁰ Blair considers that 'women laugh at the provincial lady's trials and tribulations because they see their own become amusing under the play of her wit'.¹⁰¹

Delafield was well known for her wit, and it was not just in witticisms that her characters spoke, but also through the careful management and strategic positioning of the reader, and through her cunningly subjective narrators, that the humour is created. Delafield's novel *The Way Things Are* was considered to be 'unbrokenly hilarious' and Delafield was proclaimed as being 'one of the wittiest of living English writers'.¹⁰² In Delafield's review of Young's *The Curate's Wife* she wrote 'humour runs all through it, just as humour runs all through life, for those who have eyes to see it'.¹⁰³ Delafield obviously found life itself amusing and entertaining and it is that which she put into her writing. She therefore appreciated Young's novels as they are similarly conceived.

Young also created very witty central characters, Hannah Mole, Dahlia and Celia in particular.

⁹⁹ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 57.

¹⁰⁰ Briganti and Mezei 18.

¹⁰¹ Emily Newell Blair, "A Few Books for the Many," *Good Housekeeping* 96.4 Apr. 1933: 90.

¹⁰² D. L. Murray, "New Novels," *The Times Literary Supplement* 15 Sep. 1927: 622; Gould, *The Observer* 29 May 1932: 6.

¹⁰³ E. M. Delafield, quoted in Young, *Curate's Wife*.

‘What’s the matter with the gas?’ he said, looking at the pendant light. ‘It oughtn’t to make a noise like that. I’ll have a look at it tomorrow.’

‘I’ve been looking at it for more than two months and it doesn’t take the slightest notice’.¹⁰⁴

Readers wish they could be that quick and clever and so the characters are very desirable as friends or even alternative identities. A major part of the reader’s enjoyment in identifying with the central characters in Delafield’s and Young’s novels is precisely because they are a slightly better version of themselves. The characters endure the humdrum ordinary nature of their domestic lives with wit and humour. Even though Hannah has to work for a living, and is bound to the house and orders of her employer, her mind is free, and it ‘keeps up its own independent and sardonic commentary’.¹⁰⁵ The irony Hannah expresses, particularly her comments about other people, ‘ensures the reader’s complicity’.¹⁰⁶ With both authors there are inside jokes between the reader and the central character and we are encouraged to laugh at other characters’ expense. This creates a sure bond between reader and central character.

As well as the writing style and clever use of narrator and language, a key reason the reader is able to identify so readily with the characters is because they appear to be realistically portrayed. For instance, Young’s character Celia has an ‘unusual degree of honesty with which she admits her most intimate feelings for Gerald’.¹⁰⁷ A reviewer considers that in *Celia* ‘Young has attempted one of the most daring tasks of the novelist – that of risking the resentment of the reader by getting down to the truth about a character’,

¹⁰⁴ Young, *Miss Mole* 170.

¹⁰⁵ Beauman, “Introduction”, *Miss Mole* vi.

¹⁰⁶ Briganti and Mezei 106.

¹⁰⁷ Knight ii.

but she has achieved it as, the reviewer maintains, Celia 'won affection at first sight'.¹⁰⁸ Both authors provide a full account of their characters' personality, including their flaws and weaknesses. This gives them depth and vitality. The authors created 'plausible and complicated modern heroines of the everyday'.¹⁰⁹ The provincial lady is referred to as 'a very human and lively companion'.¹¹⁰ In her, Delafield is considered to have 'created a complete and therefore composite portrait of, not only one woman, but a type of woman, a state of society, a phase of life'.¹¹¹ The books are very honest about life. Blair asserts, 'it is all so exactly as life is'.¹¹²

The characters' concerns and interests often mirror those of the reader, enabling them to understand the characters and giving them further insight into their lives. Delafield acknowledges the fact in *The Way Things Are*, when Laura considers:

Imagination, emotionalism, sentimentalism ... what woman is not the victim of these insidious and fatally unpractical qualities?

But how difficult, Laura reflected, to see oneself as an average woman and not, rather, as one entirely unique, in unique circumstances....¹¹³

The authors cleverly portray their characters' inner workings. They understand how people's minds work and their characters even self-reflexively consider their own minds and how they work.

How strangely the mind worked. She had heard a name in the night and the indefatigable secretary who had charge of her memory had been silently busy with

¹⁰⁸ Marriott 7.

¹⁰⁹ Briganti and Mezei 165.

¹¹⁰ Cook, *The Times Literary Supplement* 3 Nov. 1932: 810.

¹¹¹ Anonymous 1609.

¹¹² Blair, "Sixteen Books to Suit" 164.

¹¹³ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 336.

the files and the card indexes and, determined to find some sort of connection, had at last produced it.¹¹⁴

Delafield and Young's readers would have been around the same age and have experienced the same history as characters such as Celia, Laura and the provincial lady. Domestic novels were primarily read by middle-aged women, and were therefore aimed at that readership. The readers would also have understood the younger woman's dilemma, like Jenny's, Dahlia's or Monica's. They were interested in the same things as the characters, and the authors knew that and fed that common bond. So when Dahlia is frustrated that Cecil does not want to hear about trivial observations during her day, she shares them with the reader instead.

Cecil's lack of real interest in details was a surprise and a disappointment to Dahlia. ... For Dahlia, the remark of the grocer who handed her a packet of tea, people's faces, house and clothes, were part of the stuff of life; they were also interesting in themselves, as the experiment of a scientist may be to him, and, like him, though with a much less conscious purpose, she was co-ordinating her knowledge and anxious to share it.¹¹⁵

Dahlia goes on to recollect them to herself and provides the reader with beautiful description. The reader would have been interested in this detail and would have related to many of the daily domesticities of the characters. 'The domestic sphere remained central to many women's lives throughout the first half of the twentieth century'.¹¹⁶ Many of the

¹¹⁴ Young, *Celia* 295-6.

¹¹⁵ Young, *Curate's Wife* 77.

¹¹⁶ Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) 11.

characters also enjoy people-watching and are keen observers of their neighbours, as Lydia states, 'people were extraordinarily interesting'.¹¹⁷

Another aspect of these domestic novels which makes them more convincing than other middlebrow books, such as romance novels, is the fact that they do not have unrealistic neat and tidy endings. There is no great summing up or discovery about life. All the characters' problems are not solved and there is no expectation that they will live happily ever after. The characters just go on living. This is Celia's conclusion, 'like the others they would just go on and, as Stephen had said, it was not a bad thing to do'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ E. M. Delafield, *The Heel of Achilles* (London: Hutchinson & Co, n.d.) 89.

¹¹⁸ Young, *Celia* 414.

Chapter Three

‘These characters live their way in and out of the book’.¹¹⁹

Young’s novel *Celia* opens and closes with the thoughts of the central character, Celia Marston. The reader is placed on her side right from the start, and she is the primary focaliser. For the first fifteen chapters she is the sole focaliser, so all contact with the other characters is filtered through her. The reader receives her descriptions and opinions of them, before they have the chance to know them independently, so the reader is immediately and unknowingly biased. This is a method both Young and Delafield employ in almost all of their novels. They cleverly control the reader’s responses to the other characters, through using the already established relationship between the reader and the central character. For example, from chapter sixteen of *Celia* onwards, the focalisation swaps between Celia and other characters, so the reader gets access to other characters’ minds, but, although the reader is not aware of it, they are unable to simply and impartially accept their thoughts, they are always read with Celia’s point of view in mind. The reader cannot help but view the characters and interpret them as Celia does.

The reader has been trained to trust Celia’s judgement, but, they later find they have ‘been lulled into a false sense of security, a security dependent upon our empathy with Celia’.¹²⁰ She is largely mistaken in her assumptions about her husband Gerald, as other members of her family find themselves to be about their spouses. They have ‘assumed a

¹¹⁹ H. 9.

¹²⁰ Knight v.

knowledge of their partner they are ill-fitted to claim, and built their marriage upon it—only to discover they have fooled themselves’.¹²¹ These discoveries are not made until towards the end of the novel, when it becomes clear to the reader that they do not have the full account. The reader finally gains access to the husbands’ thoughts and memories and earlier unexplained references and marital frustrations are brought into a new light. This highlights the reader’s previous dependence on and trust of Celia and highlights a recurring theme in many of these novels – that it is impossible to fully know another person, even a family member or partner.

Young’s *William* is another example of a novel where the reader’s opinions about characters are created by the central focalising character. We receive William’s judgements about his family and accept them without question. Because of him we feel sympathy and understanding for his wife, annoyance at his daughter Mabel, her husband John and his son-in-law Herbert and we are placed, with him, securely on his daughter Lydia’s side. The crisis of the story is Lydia, yet we never have Lydia’s point of view. Even when we, through William, read a letter she has written, it is still filtered by William, and the reader’s perceptions are influenced by his thoughts on the letter. At no point does the reader enter Lydia’s thoughts, so, as Stella Deen notes, ‘there is no disinterested stance from which to view Lydia’.¹²² The reader is completely influenced by other characters’ opinions, and we are given a wide variety of thoughts on the matter by the family members, through the narration, reported conversations and focalisation, which switches between certain key

¹²¹ Knight vi.

¹²² Stella Deen, ““So Minute and Yet so Alive”: Domestic Modernity in E. H. Young’s *William*,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 22.1 Spring 2003: 109.

characters. Despite this access to other characters' thoughts, the reader is still kept on William's side throughout. It has been argued that because we are never privy to her internal workings, Lydia seems less plausible than the other characters. For example, John Bayley writes, 'she remains a rather too 'poetic' conception who never quite comes physically to life'.¹²³ He does concede, however, that she becomes 'a very real figure when seen through the eyes of her own family'.¹²⁴ Other members of the family are very real to the reader, and so through their contemplations of and conversations with Lydia, they breathe life into her character. As one reviewer put it, 'these characters live their way in and out of the book'.¹²⁵

As has been previously stated, Young is adept at controlling her reader through her central character without the reader being aware of it. *William* is one such example of this, another is *Miss Mole*. Hannah and the narrator describe the other characters' personalities, interpret their facial expressions, analyse their spoken words and speculate on their motives. For example, 'Hannah suspected that Ruth's smile had been calculated to make her sister exclaim angrily'.¹²⁶ Hannah delights in 'divining the meaning of his looks and foretelling his remarks'.¹²⁷ The writing style also changes to denote a character's personality. For example, when Hannah is imagining Robert Corder speaking, Young writes in very long sentences.

In one of his public speeches, or in a sermon, he would have described the home just as Hannah saw it, as a small community in which personalities were stronger than

¹²³ John Bayley, "Introduction," *William* (London: Virago Press, 1988) xiii.

¹²⁴ Bayley xiv.

¹²⁵ H. 9.

¹²⁶ Young, *Miss Mole* 56.

¹²⁷ Young, *Miss Mole* 227.

theories of conduct, resilience more enduring than rigidity; he would have said there was no life without change and struggle, and, becoming metaphorical – Hannah enjoyed composing his sermons for him – he would have likened young people to plants which must be given space and air¹²⁸

This sentence goes on for another fifty-seven words before the full stop is reached. In Hannah's composition of his sermon, she is putting words in the character's mouth, and so is presenting him to the reader through her own imagination. She is suggesting that he is a man who likes the sound of his own voice and will go on and on talking, wearying his listeners. The reader accepts these views unquestioningly, however, are they trustworthy or accurate? The reader places a great deal of trust in a character they do not fully know, but Hannah's lively and amusing personality is seductive and attractive.

To begin with, the same appears to be true of Maurice in *The Vicar's Daughter*. The novel opens with him and for the first seven chapters the story is told from his point of view. The reader is introduced to the cast of characters by Maurice, yet very soon we learn not to trust him. He is a hyper sensitive person who reads things into every glance and tone of word. In the middle of chapter seven the reader is then reassured by the narrator, that they are right to distrust Maurice's interpretations and conclusions.

His life, though he would have shrunk from the admission, had, like that of a wild creature, encouraged habits of observation in self-defence, and though, like such a creature's, his deductions might be wrong, he was constantly on the alert.¹²⁹

This waters the seed of doubt already present in the reader's mind, and Young then cements this by changing the focalising character in the following chapter. The book continues to swap focalisation between Maurice, Margaret and Hilary, and due to this access to multiple

¹²⁸ Young, *Miss Mole* 74.

¹²⁹ Young, *Vicar's Daughter* 58.

characters' thoughts, the reader knows when they misinterpret or misread each other. The majority of the action in the book stems from the arrival of Caroline Mather, and misunderstandings about her identity. Yet despite the fact that everything revolves around Caroline, the reader is not given access to her thoughts or feelings. We only hear her words reported by others and we are subject to other characters' impressions of her. If the reader had access to Caroline's thoughts the truth would have surfaced immediately and all the tension in the novel would have been dispelled. Through restricting the reader's access to certain characters, Young heightens the drama.

Delafield does a similar thing in her novel *Faster! Faster!*. The book centres on Claudia, although, unusually, the reader does not meet her immediately. She is introduced to the reader first by other characters through their conversations about her, meaning the reader already has an impression of her. Claudia does not enter the novel in person until the very end of chapter one, thus stimulating anticipation in the reader. The fact that Claudia is withheld from the reader is intentional, and the first meeting with her is cleverly constructed to enhance the reader's expectations. Her entrance into the novel is indicated by Claudia's daughter, Sylvia.

"Here they are," said Sylvia.

Her mother and Francis Ladislav came in by the long window.¹³⁰

And there the chapter ends. The reader must read on to really meet Claudia. Chapter two begins:

The personality of Claudia Winsloe was of a kind that made it almost impossible for her to enter into any group of people without effecting an immediate alteration in the atmosphere.¹³¹

¹³⁰ E. M. Delafield, *Faster! Faster!* (London: PFD, 2009) 19.

This is an interesting narratorial observation about Claudia, as this is the effect she has had on the reader. Delafield has expertly crafted Claudia's entrance so that it produces the same reaction in the reader as in the book's characters, thus drawing the reader in to the group and including them in the action.

The chapters of *Faster! Faster!* are split into parts and each section is told from a different character's perspective or by the narrator. This means the reader is privy to all the characters' thoughts and we are given a wide variety of opinions about Claudia. Many of these opinions differ from Claudia's own view of herself, and as the book goes on, the reader starts to distrust Claudia's judgement. Delafield gradually destabilises her central character until the reader is lost and does not know whose opinion to trust. This novel is therefore very different to Delafield's others. Although Claudia remains the central character throughout, the reader's relationship with her changes, as does their relationship with the book's other characters. Yet these gradual suspicions and changes of opinion are still cleverly controlled by Delafield, even though the reader may think they are making their own mind up. *Faster! Faster!* is a very tightly constructed novel.

A key way the reader is influenced about other characters is how they are referred to by the narrator or central character. Early on in Young's *Miss Mole*, Hannah bumps into her cousin Lilla Spenser-Smith. In conversation Hannah calls Lilla by her first name, but the narrator refers to her as Mrs. Spenser-Smith. It is clear that Lilla is a lady and her double-barrelled surname suggests wealth and influence. It is immediately obvious to both Hannah and the reader that Lilla is uncomfortable in company with Hannah, but Hannah

¹³¹ Delafield, *Faster!* 20.

mischievously ignores this and enjoys herself. The narrator calling her Mrs. Spencer-Smith denotes respect and creates a distance between them and the character. Therefore, it is only through Hannah that the reader can be informal and get close to Lilla. In *William*, William's wife is often referred to by the narrator as Mrs. Nesbitt. William is never called Mr. Nesbitt, he is always just William. This creates an intimacy between the reader and William but forces a distance between the narrator and William's wife. As in *Miss Mole*, it is only through the central character that the reader can intimately know Mrs. Nesbitt.

Delafield employs a similar tactic but to different effect. She swaps between first name and surname more to position the character than to position the reader.

It was at this point that Mr Onslow's attention to his conversation with Laura, although it did not waver, gave her an impression of being, as it were, nailed to the mast, by courtesy and kind-heartedness.

Mrs. Temple, as an instant result, ceased to be either entertaining or responsively intelligent, and their dialogue petered out.¹³²

Maurice McCullen notes that in her choice of reference, Delafield nuances 'her heroine's objective and subjective roles'.¹³³

Names are an important aspect of a character. They often reveal something about the person, for example, when we meet Hannah Mole she is working for Mrs Widdows, 'perhaps a pun on the many widows of whom she has been a companion'.¹³⁴ Hannah herself has an interesting and rather apt surname, which alludes to two concepts. The first is that of a spy, and Sally Beaman considers Hannah to be acting as 'a spy in the house of life'.¹³⁵ The

¹³² Delafield, *Way Things Are* 44.

¹³³ McCullen 37.

¹³⁴ Briganti and Mezei 102.

¹³⁵ Beaman, "Introduction" *Miss Mole* vi.

second is the animal, as Hannah hides parts of herself away, keeping her secrets.¹³⁶ Another character with a fitting surname is Mr Doubleday, as he is always saying things twice. “Sunshine, sunshine,’ he said, going to the window. ... ‘Yes, yes,’ he said approvingly’.¹³⁷ Young is embodying aspects of her characters in their surnames for various effects. Often it is a pun on the character themselves, as with Doubleday, or the reverends Mr Corder and Mr Roper, but it often also reveals things about the character to the reader, enabling them to have instant insight into the character and to feel as if they know them from the start. Delafield does not use names in this way, but she does pick them carefully. Her characters also suit their names, as they are generally common names, and her characters are ordinary people.

Another key way in which Delafield creates verisimilitude is through dialogue, at which she excels. She employs indirect speech and free indirect speech, but her direct speech is what she was lauded for. D. L. Murray, a book reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement*, praised ‘the almost hallucinatory naturalism of the dialogue’ in *The Way Things Are*.¹³⁸ He considered the conversation in *The Heel of Achilles* to be ‘so faithfully reported that our ears often seem filled with the actual voice of the speaker’.¹³⁹ It is interesting that Murray states it is ‘faithfully reported’, as this infers that the characters do actually exist, that they are real people whose conversations are being recorded. Delafield is very good at presenting a character’s personality through their words. In *The Heel of Achilles*, for the grouchy and cynical Grandpapa she uses short exclamations such as ‘Eh’ and ‘Ah ha!’ to punctuate his

¹³⁶ Beaman, “Introduction” *Miss Mole* xi.

¹³⁷ Young, *Curate’s Wife* 46.

¹³⁸ Murray, *The Times Literary Supplement* 15 Sep. 1927: 622.

¹³⁹ D. L. Murray, “New Novels,” *The Times Literary Supplement* 14 Apr. 1921: 243.

speech.¹⁴⁰ She cleverly portrays Lady Honoret's character through her pretentious language, using italics to intimate stresses.

“... Can't stay one *second*, dearest. The Duchess is *screaming* for me to come and finish our stall for the Fancy Fair....”

“Don't *talk* about Calmar's New Symphony! Wretched creature! He had the audacity to ask me what I thought of it, and I was *perfectly* frank. I said there's only one way in which it strikes me, and that is—*rococo!*”¹⁴¹

This observance of character and consistency in dialogue aids the reader in buying in to the fantasy and believing the characters are real.

A key character in many of Delafield's novels is the male counterpart to the heroine. However, the reader never has direct access to him. All his words and actions are filtered by the heroine, so the reader's perception of him is always biased. In this way Delafield distances the man from the reader and ensures that the reader's and the central character's opinions are the same. In *The Way Things Are*, Laura's husband is described as, 'Alfred, like so many husbands, was of a silent disposition'.¹⁴² This brief sentence immediately assigns Alfred to a type. The casual use of the phrase, 'like so many husbands', both puts him in a majority position, whilst criticising him for it. Because he 'talked not at all', Laura imagines what he is thinking and interprets his silences.¹⁴³

She spent five minutes in the nursery, and found that Alfred, unusually, had brought the car round to the front door punctually, and was waiting for her.

“I'm so sorry,” apologised Laura, energetically returning the frantic hand-waving of the children.

Alfred did not say, “You're not going to the North Pole. You'll be home again in about two hours from now,” but it was Laura's misfortune to attribute such definite

¹⁴⁰ Delafield, *Heel of Achilles* 15 & 20.

¹⁴¹ Delafield, *Heel of Achilles* 176.

¹⁴² Delafield, *Way Things Are* 19.

¹⁴³ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 1.

meanings to his silences, and to clothe them in pungent and unsympathetic language. She often held wordless and impassioned conversations with Alfred, replying to many things that he had not said.¹⁴⁴

Because the reader is positioned squarely with Laura, and is never given access to Alfred's thoughts, we are unable to know if her interpretations are correct.

Laura is dissatisfied with her husband and his lack of interest, so when she meets Duke Ayland, a loquacious and emotional man, she is immediately smitten. Yet once again, the reader is kept away from this man. The narrator tells us that Duke talked a lot, 'Duke had so many things to say to Laura, and she so much liked hearing them', but his words are not reported.¹⁴⁵ The reader does not know anything about Duke, apart from what Laura thinks about him. Laura keeps him all to herself. The novel is reflecting Laura's selfish desire for him and so is not sharing him with the reader. This lack of interaction or direct contact with him means there is no real depth of character so he seems unreal to the reader. However, this is not a failure on Delafield's part, it is intentional. Delafield is being purposefully satirical in both the timely arrival of Duke on the scene and in him meeting all of Laura's requirements. Duke is the fantasy and fantasies are not real. The Laura and Duke storyline is akin to that of a popular romance novel, and therefore, is presented as stereotypical and unrealistic. Laura lives in the carefully constructed "real" world of a domestic novel and there is no place for an actual romance fantasy within that world, only the dream of one in a character's mind, as I will explore later. So, unsurprisingly, the relationship ends and Laura remains within the bounds of her married domestic life.

¹⁴⁴ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 38.

¹⁴⁵ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 189-90.

In Delafield's *Thank Heaven Fasting*, Monica, the central character, is on the hunt for a husband, and during the book there are three potentials. However the reader does not get to know them particularly well, and never has access to their thoughts. 'The thin characterization of the men, in this particular novel, works very well. They are to be seen as a necessary condition of life rather than as human beings'.¹⁴⁶ Monica does not really know or understand any of the men in this novel, and therefore the reader cannot either. The novel is told from Monica's naive perspective and that is where the reader is positioned too.

The other characters that Delafield does not develop or allow the reader to interact with are the servants. They are always one dimensional characters with no personality. They are also generally disappointing and an annoyance to the heroine. However this is a reasonable portrayal. Readers would not have wanted a relationship with the servants. Servants and their employers had a very complicated relationship involving a definite power struggle. This can be seen in *The Way Things Are* and the *Diary of a Provincial Lady* series, where both heroines suffer from servant problems and do not dominate their servants but fear them.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, because the central character does not know their servants, the reader cannot either. The novels are very consistent in restricting the reader's knowledge to that of the characters, thus ensuring consistency and guaranteeing a constant relationship between them.

¹⁴⁶ Penelope Fitzgerald, "Afterword," *Thank Heaven Fasting* (London: Virago Press, 1988) 227-8.

¹⁴⁷ Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900 – 50* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995) 133.

Chapter Four

‘Literature and life become inextricably intertwined’.¹⁴⁸

As has been highlighted in previous chapters, the authors carefully mirrored their readers in the creation of their characters. This provides the characters with an apparently genuine personality and encourages the reader to identify with them. One key way in which the authors achieve this mirroring is in having their characters read, discuss and enjoy books, as this is exactly what the readers are doing. Humble has studied this and has concluded that ‘reading is a fundamental trope’ in middlebrow novels generally.¹⁴⁹ It is presented as ‘a source of deep, sensual satisfactions, a self-indulgent pleasure, a means of escape as well as an affirmation of life choices.’¹⁵⁰

In Delafield’s and Young’s novels there are many references to a character’s feelings about books and these are always positive. The characters derive pleasure from them, just like the reader does, and in fact is simultaneously experiencing, in reading about the character’s affection for books. They also give the characters comfort. In *Jenny Wren*, books were part of the precious treasures the girls brought with them when they moved house. When the lodger Edwin Cummings is dismissive of her father’s books, Jenny instinctively protects them.

She gave it up and, glancing past his head at the rows of her father’s books, she nodded towards them. ‘Have you looked at those?’

‘Yes, first thing I did. There’s nothing there.’

¹⁴⁸ Humble 53.

¹⁴⁹ Humble 46.

¹⁵⁰ Humble 47.

‘Nothing! Only the best books that ever were written,’ Jenny said, with a quaver in her voice, and going towards them as though every word in them were dear to her and must be shielded from this young man’s insults, she put her back and her outstretched arms against them.¹⁵¹

These books are also symbolic of her father and his vast knowledge which she learnt from. Jenny, like many of Young’s characters, had a traditional education including the great writers of the past. She appreciates the works of Shakespeare and Austen, sharing her affection for Austen with Mr Doubleday, in *The Curate’s Wife*, as will be later evidenced. This referencing of classic writers has the effect of drawing the reader even closer to the character, as they, too, will have been educated in the classics. The reader could therefore identify with the character to an even greater extent, as they have a shared knowledge. Brown writes, ‘intertextual references are frequently used to align these novels with existing (often ‘classic’ or ‘highbrow’) literature and to build relationships with an implied community of readers’.¹⁵²

In mentioning her characters’ enjoyment of the classics, Young signifies her own knowledge of them, and in doing so, aligns herself and her novels with them. Many contemporary critics have drawn comparisons between Young’s novels and Austen’s, for example in the *Church Times*’ review of *The Curate’s Wife*, ‘there is little, if any, exaggeration in describing Miss E. H. Young as a modern Jane Austen’.¹⁵³ Similar comparisons were also made between Delafield and Austen. ‘Miss Delafield shares with Jane Austen the gift of minute observation, and of acute, remorseless penetration into the minds and hearts of

¹⁵¹ Young, *Jenny Wren* 53-4.

¹⁵² Brown.

¹⁵³ Rev of *The Curate’s Wife*, by E. H. Young, *Church Times*, quoted in Young, *Curate’s Wife*.

everyday, respectable people'.¹⁵⁴ Both authors are following the Austen tradition but are putting their own modern take on it. It is possible that Young was aware of and perhaps flattered by these comparisons, as she purposefully has a character draw her own comparison between her life and that of Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). In *The Curate's Wife*, Jenny is warned off her future husband, by his mother, Mrs Doubleday, who is not in favour of the match. During the conversation, Jenny says:

'I'm trying to remember something. This doesn't seem real to me, not a bit, but I know it has happened before.'

'I can well believe it,' said Mrs. Doubleday.

'But where?' Jenny said as though she desired assistance. Then a candid smile broke across her face. She would not be really rude to Master Doubleday's mother, but surely this might be allowed her. 'I knew someone else had said these things, nearly these things. It was Lady Catherine de Burgh.'

'I don't know her.'

'Don't you?' Jenny's surprise seemed to indicate some lack in Mrs. Doubleday, who condescended to inquire whether the lady lived in Herefordshire.¹⁵⁵

Almost every reader of this novel will have instantly recalled, with Jenny, the famous scene in *Pride and Prejudice* and will have enjoyed the comparison. The reference is never explained or cited in the novel. Young assumes her reader's knowledge, and there is a certain joy and sense of satisfaction elicited from them for that trust and esteem from the author. Young has also created an inside joke between the reader and Jenny. Mrs Doubleday is not a likeable character, and this display of her ignorance is a joy to the reader, as it is to Jenny. They both feel there is 'some lack in Mrs. Doubleday' and this makes Jenny the winner of this confrontation. A cheer rises inside the reader, who is aligned, even more closely, to Jenny.

¹⁵⁴ Olive Heseltine, "New Novels," *Time and Tide* 8.40 7 Oct. 1927: 884.

¹⁵⁵ Young, *Curate's Wife* 317.

This joke, at the expense of Mrs Doubleday, later resurfaces in conversation with her husband, when she uses Lady de Burgh as a reference of Jenny's connections:

'I heard of those Herefordshire people long ago. It's the moral aspect – and I heard of Lady de Burgh, too. I'm sure they took care to tell you about her. This girl of Reginald's says she lives in Kent.'

'Ah!' said Mr. Doubleday. He covered his mouth with his hands, he blinked in rapid thought. 'Ah!'

There were times, even now, when he neglected his detective novels and turned with relief to literature which had some of its delight for him in the knowledge that his wife would not understand it if she tried to read it. And that little girl had taken her small, mischievous revenge. But there was need for care here, for Reginald's sake and her.

'What else did you hear about her?' he asked.

'Not much,' Mrs. Doubleday said cautiously, sadly, knowing that things were now beyond her keeping.

'Then say nothing yourself,' Mr. Doubleday advised seriously. 'From what I know of her – No Flora, don't introduce her into your conversation as a valuable acquaintance.'¹⁵⁶

It is pleasant for the reader that Mr Doubleday gets to join in the joke, and it also serves as confirmation of his worth that he is able to instantly recognise the reference. The reader is aware that his covering of his mouth is in order to hide his smile, and this joke also positions him above his wife. He instructs her not to mention it to anyone else, against her implied protests. He is in charge of the situation.

As well as traditional classic authors, characters make reference to current literature. As quoted above, Mr Doubleday is a fan of detective novels. These were an extremely popular form of middlebrow fiction in the inter-war years, so many readers would have identified with his enjoyment of them. Laura, in Delafield's *The Way Things Are* similarly

¹⁵⁶ Young, *Curate's Wife* 329-30.

enjoys detective novels. On her visit to the library to change her books, a trip the reader would also make, the assistant offers her a new detective story.

“It’s in great demand, and people say it’s excellent.”

Lady Kingsley-Browne uttered a faint, protesting cry.

“How truly dreadful! *The Murder in the Old Mill*—what a name! And to offer it to you, of all people, my dear!”

The flattering implication of Laura’s eclectic taste made it rather difficult to accept *The Murder in the Old Mill*, but Laura did so.

“Alfred always likes a good murder story,” she apologetically explained; aware that in this case her likings and Alfred’s were identical, but not having the moral courage to say so.

“Men!” ejaculated Lady Kingsley-Browne, in a tone of indulgence. “What about the Georgian Poems for your other choice?”

Laura did not get very frequent opportunities of changing her books at the Quinnerton Library, and from motives of economy she did not subscribe to a London one. She had no wish to take the Georgian Poems in place of the many new novels she wanted to read. Nevertheless she presently found herself leaving the shop with this unwanted addition to her stock of literature.¹⁵⁷

Lady Kingsley-Browne is another unlikeable character, so her pushy and pretentious attitude towards Laura and her books gives the reader another reason to dislike her and to side with Laura. The reader can also share in the pain of not being able to get to the library more often and then, when there, not getting one of ‘the many new novels she wanted to read’.

Another experience the reader can share with Laura is that of fantasising that what happens in books will happen to them. Laura indulges in this common pastime:

Sometimes she had wondered whether, like the heroines of novels read in her schoolroom days, she would suddenly discover, on returning home, qualities, hitherto unperceived in Alfred, and fall violently, passionately, and legitimately in love with her own husband.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 64.

¹⁵⁸ Delafield, *Way Things Are* 217.

This wish does not come true for Laura, as it will not come true for most readers. *The Way Things Are* is a domestic novel purportedly set in the 'real' world, not a romance novel, and if Laura had suddenly fallen in love with Alfred, the semblance of reality would have been broken. As it is, the facade never falters and the reader can identify with Laura in her wish.

As well as reading books, the provincial lady enjoys discussing books, mirroring the reader in that. After a dinner party she writes:

Everybody (except Robert) talks about books. We all say (a) that we have read *The Good Companions*, (b) that it is a very *long* book, (c) that it was chosen by the Book of the Month Club in America and must be having immense sales, and (d) that American sales are What Really Count. We then turn to *High Wind in Jamaica* and say (a) that it is quite a short book, (b) that we hated—or, alternatively, adored—it, and (c) that it Really *Is* exactly *Like* Children.¹⁵⁹

It is clear to the reader that the analysis was not particularly incisive and was probably repeated, almost word-for-word, each time new books were discussed. Yet, despite the tongue-in-cheek account of the conversation, it highlights what was a common occurrence at dinner parties, and Delafield's readers would have been greatly amused by this parody of it.

Both books which are discussed are middlebrow from 1929, so were still relatively new when the diary was published. In this way Delafield kept her character very up-to-date, enabling readers to identify with her extremely easily, as they would have been reading and discussing the same books. Such contemporary references add credence to the belief that the provincial lady was a real person living in the real world.

¹⁵⁹ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 14.

This is only one example of the many and varied allusions the provincial lady makes throughout her diaries to books, both old and new. Humble cites the provincial lady's contemporary references in support of her argument that 'literature and life become inextricably intertwined, and experiences are understood in terms of the literary events they recall'.¹⁶⁰ The provincial lady is continually being reminded by events in her life of things that occur in books, similarly to that discussed earlier in this chapter of Jenny's recalling Lady Catherine de Burgh in *The Curate's Wife*. This comparison and reflection in life upon books is something the reader also partakes in, and the references make the realistic nature of the novel's world more persuasive. Referencing books within a book creates a fictional world within a fictional world that is masquerading as the real one. And so the reader is absorbed.

The second provincial lady book begins with her writing in her diary of her success in having published a book. This leads to her being invited to various literary events, one of which is hosted by *Time and Tide*. This is an entertaining contemporary reference as the diary was published in *Time and Tide*. It is almost like advertising from within the journal's pages, or Delafield is expressing her gratitude and admiration. Through the provincial lady Delafield also pays a compliment to her readers:

Party definitely a success, and am impressed by high standard and charm, good looks, intelligence, and excellent manners of *Time and Tide* readers.¹⁶¹

This flattery, and acknowledgement of their existence, is almost direct contact between reader and central character. Readers at the time would instinctively have drawn the provincial lady even closer to their hearts.

¹⁶⁰ Humble 53.

¹⁶¹ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 347.

Another use Delafield makes of references to actual books, is to say something about her characters and to date them. So, in *Thank Heaven Fasting*, the reader is not explicitly told when the book is set, but Monica is a keen reader of Dickens, Scott, Ruskin and L. T. Meades, thus implying the book is set towards the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶² In *Faster! Faster!* Delafield uses her characters' references to books to explain their place in the world and their subsequent viewpoint on it. When the reader is introduced to Frances Ladislaw, Delafield writes:

She had been the daughter of a widowed clergyman in a Yorkshire country parish.

“Like the Brontës,” she muttered, thinking this over. But she immediately added, with characteristic honesty and common sense: “Well, no. Not really in the least like the Brontës.” And indeed she did not, in any way, resemble the gifted and unhappy Brontës.¹⁶³

Not only does Delafield make an interesting connection between her narrator and Frances, it is as if they are having a conversation with each other, she uses Frances' reference to the Brontës to develop her character. The fact that Frances knows enough about the Brontë sisters to make the comparison shows she is educated in the classics and has kept the interest alive. Contrastingly, later in the book, a considerably younger character makes an indirect reference to Radclyffe Hall's controversial 1928 middlebrow novel *The Well of Loneliness*:

“I never did anything special at school. I quite liked it. I never made any special friend. I used to think I'd like to, frightfully, but they were a bit down on friendships, at school. I suppose they have to be, because wells of loneliness and all that sort of

¹⁶² E. M. Delafield, *Thank Heaven Fasting* (London: Virago Press, 1988) 26; Briganti and Mezei 149.

¹⁶³ Delafield, *Faster! 4*.

thing. Not that I should think I've got the slightest Lesbian tendency myself, should you?"¹⁶⁴

This more recent reference reveals a definite difference between Frances' and Sylvia's literary period and positioning.

Characters' references to actual books also often shows their awareness of the literary issues of the time. For instance, Ellie, in Delafield's *What Is Love?* seeks distraction and enjoyment, and for this desires a middlebrow rather than a highbrow book.

She must find something really interesting and absorbing to bring upstairs, tonight. Perhaps there might be some new novels in the library. Something not at all difficult, modern and clever. Perhaps a detective story, if Lionel had left one behind him. He often bought one.¹⁶⁵

Laura, similarly, does not enjoy difficult books, and neither does the provincial lady. There are many references in her diary of her struggles with highbrow books:

Am asked what I think of *Harriet Hume* but am unable to say, as I have not read it. Have a depressed feeling that this is going to be another case of *Orlando* about which was perfectly able to talk most intelligently until I read it, and found myself unfortunately unable to understand any of it.¹⁶⁶

Rosa Maria Bracco, a staunch supporter of the highbrow, to the extent that she derides the middlebrow in her study of it, comments on the tendency of middlebrow 'fictional characters' to 'weigh in with their judgement' on highbrow literature.¹⁶⁷ This is a clever technique as it not only allows middlebrow authors to air their views in print, but it also fully immerses their characters in the current affairs of the time, further enhancing the verisimilitude of the text.

¹⁶⁴ Delafield, *Faster!* 80.

¹⁶⁵ E. M. Delafield, *What Is Love?* (London: PFD, 2009) 165.

¹⁶⁶ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 5.

¹⁶⁷ Bracco 124.

As well as the intertextual references to actual books, characters also sometimes compare themselves to book characters, or refer to themselves in terms of stock book characters. In Young's *The Misses Mallett*, Henrietta thinks:

Afterwards there was some satisfaction in thinking that she had done the dramatic thing – what the pure-minded heroine always did to the villain; but at the time the action was spontaneous and unconsidered.¹⁶⁸

Henrietta's comparison of herself and her actions in terms of common book characters mirrors that of the reader, in identifying with the characters in this book. Similarly, in *William*, Lydia writes in a letter that she feels 'like a deserted heroine'.¹⁶⁹ She is living in an old gothic-style mansion and so is instinctively likening herself to a similar fictional scenario. Although Jenny, in *Jenny Wren*, never out-rightly compares herself to a book character, she considers her meeting with Cyril and the subsequent emotions and events in characteristic romance novel terms. She views Cyril as 'a knight on horseback' and the place they met as an 'enchanted meadow'.¹⁷⁰

Delafield employs a similar technique. In *The Heel of Achilles* the narrator explains that Lydia 'was complacently aware of being the heroine of that story'.¹⁷¹ This is both an example of Lydia's self-centredness and a self-reflexive comment on the nature of the book. Lydia is the heroine of the story, and in speaking it out it is almost acknowledging her fictional state. However, this only serves to make her appear even more credible, as a self-reflexive character has more depth. Some of Delafield's central characters also identify themselves with characters in the books in their world. In *The Way Things Are*, the narrator

¹⁶⁸ Young, *Misses Mallett* 118.

¹⁶⁹ E. H. Young, *William* (London: Virago Press, 1988) 150.

¹⁷⁰ Young, *Jenny Wren* 150.

¹⁷¹ Delafield, *Heel of Achilles* 38.

says that Laura ‘read an immense number of novels, half unconsciously identifying herself with the central figure in each’.¹⁷² This is exactly what the reader is doing. Delafield is mirroring her reader’s reaction to Laura in Laura herself. Similarly, Ellie in *What is Love?* every night ‘told herself a story in which she identified herself with the heroine of the day’s storybook, or else with someone else, who in real life, had captured her imagination’.¹⁷³

This reference to ‘real life’ is another clever technique Delafield employs. She has her characters talk about books and relate them to real life, that is, the “real” life within the world of the novel. For example, in *Tension*, Miss Marchrose and Julian compare real life to literature.

“I wonder,” said Julian. “The interest attaching to violent action always appears to me to be rather a fictitious one.”

“So it is,” Miss Marchrose answered quickly. “Surely in real life the majority of dramas are almost devoid of violent action, nowadays. I mean that a crisis, off the stage, is not necessarily brought about by a duel, or a murder, or an elopement.”

“The world is more subtle than it used to be,” Julian assented. “What you call a crisis, after all is mostly an affair of the emotions. It is generally led up to by an atmospheric tension and culminates in some ultra violence of emotion, whether of anger or sorrow or resolution.”¹⁷⁴

As well as characters identifying with characters in books, or comparing their lives to books, they also wonder what would happen if they were in a book. For example, the provincial lady writes:

Curious and unprofitable reflection crosses my mind that if I were the heroine of a novel, recent encounter between Bill and myself would lead to further developments of tense and emotional description, culminating either in renunciation, or—if novel a modern one—complete flight of cap over windmill.

¹⁷² Delafield, *Way Things Are* 91.

¹⁷³ Delafield, *What is Love?* 17.

¹⁷⁴ E. M. Delafield, *Tension* (Memphis: General Books LLC, 2009) 59.

Real life, as usual, totally removed from literary conventions, and nothing remains but to hasten indoors and deal with accumulated household duties.¹⁷⁵

This flight of fancy adds more verisimilitude to the characterisation of the provincial lady, as it appears to claim that she is not a character in a book, but is in fact in 'real life'. It could be argued that Delafield is poking fun at both her character and her reader, in having the provincial lady consider herself as the heroine of a novel. It could almost break the spell, by pointing the fact out. However the laughter and enjoyment in this episode comes from the provincial lady's manner of speaking about it. She is making fun of herself, and her thoughts, and her abrupt return to the domesticities of 'real life' elicits humour and understanding from the reader. Far from exposing the falsehood of the provincial lady's existence, this serves to confirm her as being fully human.

¹⁷⁵ Delafield, *Provincial Lady* 326-7.

Conclusion

'A book ... that makes it easier to face life'.¹⁷⁶

Delafield and Young's domestic novels offered their readers a diversion from the humdrum of their lives whilst immersing them into a life and world not dissimilar to their own. This would suggest that the novels failed to offer the sought after escapism and therefore were not pleasing their readers. Yet the complete opposite was true, as is evidenced by the contemporary reviews and fan mail quoted throughout this thesis. The readers were gratified at finding their lives reflected back at them in the novels, and flattered themselves into believing that they were just like the characters. The authors walk a fine line between fantasy and reality. They work hard to convince the reader that the world in the novels is the real world and they create very plausible characters, but they also create a fiction. The novels do present everyday life and do contain enough of the humdrum domesticities to convince and involve the reader, but they also contain plot and action. The characters are not that far removed from real people. They are close enough to be convincing, but they are a little bit more witty and fun and independent than the average housewife reader. The characters make the kind of statements, references and quips that the readers would have liked to make, so the reader, in identifying with the characters, partakes in a cleverly made and concealed aspirational fantasy.

The fantasy in these novels is not far-fetched or over-blown, like the fantasies in other middlebrow genres such as romance novels. It is much more subtle and mature. Inter-war

¹⁷⁶ Blair, "Sixteen Books to Suit" 164.

domestic novels offer a different kind of story to other middlebrow texts. In the majority of them, 'marriage became the subject of rather than the solution to the plot'.¹⁷⁷ Rather than ending in marriage, as many traditional realist novels and romance novels do, domestic novels' characters are often already married when the book begins. This then offers a much more mature and feasible fantasy, in a world which mirrors the lives of their readers extremely closely. The fantasy in romance novels is all to do with finding the ideal man, and by the end of the book the male protagonist has been transformed into perfect husband material. In Delafield's and Young's novels the men do not change. They are the same at the end of the book as they were at the beginning. It is the women who learn to adapt and endure and who often realise something about themselves and their lives in the course of the story. None of the marriages are presented as ideal. The fantasy element is in being the strong central female character. It is not about having their life, their husband or their children, as most of the readers feel they already have that, it is in having their mindset and wit.

In her study of romance novels and their readers, *Reading the Romance* (1987), Radway discovered that romance novels are 'valuable to them [their readers] in proportion to their lack of resemblance to the real world'.¹⁷⁸ I would argue that the measurement of the value of domestic novels is completely the opposite. The more they resemble the real world, the more enjoyable they are to their readers. Romance novels offer 'a means of transportation or escape to the exotic or ... to that which is different'.¹⁷⁹ Whereas the fantasy element of

¹⁷⁷ Briganti and Mezei 18.

¹⁷⁸ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Culture* (London: Verso, 1987) 100.

¹⁷⁹ Radway, *Reading the Romance* 61.

domestic novels is not to do with taking the reader to another place, it is about the reader aspiring to live their lives in a more exciting and enjoyable way. However, one assessment of Radway's about romance novels that is equally as true of domestic novels is that 'the emotion generated within the reader by her identification with the heroine is the crucial determining factor in distinguishing between good romances and bad'.¹⁸⁰ Delafield and Young worked hard to establish and maintain a connection between the reader and the central character. If the reader had not been able to identify with the heroine the novel would not have been nearly as successful and popular. The reader would not have accepted the fantasy and would have struggled to believe the characters were real. However, their readers were easily able to emotionally identify with the heroine and therefore, applying Radway's assessment, these are classified as good novels.

Inter-war domestic novels were offering the reader a new type of reading experience. 'A new kind of female writer was for the first time addressing herself to a new kind of female reader'.¹⁸¹ This new form became so popular, and added another string to the already substantial middlebrow bow, that highbrow writers felt threatened by the increasing numbers of middlebrow readers, leading to the many vicious attacks as referenced in the first chapter. But the reason these texts were so popular is because they are engaging and cleverly written. Highbrow writers did not give middlebrow authors the credit they were due. It is gratifying that these texts are now being studied and appreciated, as Beauman

¹⁸⁰ Radway, *Reading the Romance* 184.

¹⁸¹ Beauman, *Very Great Profession* 95.

states, 'it seemed so strange that an enormous body of fiction should influence and delight a whole generation and then be ignored or dismissed'.¹⁸²

Delafield and Young were extremely talented at producing novels that a large section of the reading public wanted to read. Middlebrow books were considered to be 'not stylistically innovative or formally experimental', but, as has been evidenced in this study, this is not true.¹⁸³ They are a hybrid form, written in the traditional realist mode whilst making use of modernist techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue. Both Delafield and Young employed clever innovative techniques to great effect. Leavis was spot on when she complained middlebrow books were 'giving the public what it wants'.¹⁸⁴ These domestic novels, in particular, were meeting the readers' needs and aspirations and made them feel included in a community. Domestic novels brought about a 'literary elevation of the homely'.¹⁸⁵ In these novels domestic life was centre-stage, enabling the readers to fully engage with the characters and also feel that their lives were significant. For many women 'novel reading was one of life's chief pleasures', and Delafield and Young were ably supplying that, as can be clearly seen from the fan mail they received.¹⁸⁶ Readers had a relationship with these books. As the title quote from *Good Housekeeping* attests, 'the book held me like a visit from an amusing, valued friend'.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Beauman, *Very Great Profession* 4.

¹⁸³ Marion Shaw, "The Making of a Middle-brow Success: Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*," *Writing: A Woman's Business: Women, Writing and the Marketplace*, eds. Judy Simons and Kate Fullbrook (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 37.

¹⁸⁴ Leavis 27.

¹⁸⁵ Light 137.

¹⁸⁶ Beauman, *Very Great Profession* 3.

¹⁸⁷ Blair, "Some Rattling Good Stories" 196.

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