

Reading English

Mrs Dalloway: Critical Perspectives



Key Topics

Critical Perspectives on Woolf from Past to Present
The Battle of the Brows: Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow
The Middlebrow Strikes Back
What is Taste? What is Value? What is Literature?

Recap: Woolf, Language, Literature, & Form

- Aiming of making something “new” with the English language, despite and because of the many “echoes” each of its words has
- “Making new” with existing language but in a few form, to fit a new age, and break with literary tradition, especially with realist forms of writing
- Focus on the everyday and the mundane
- Preoccupied with the relationship between past and present, the impact of one on the other, the interplay between memory and experience
- Remembered by her contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Bowen, as a “genius”

The Cultural Landscape of Interwar Britain: The Battle of the Brows

- Woolf wrote letter on “Middlebrow” for the *The New Statesman* but never sent it
- Letter gives direct insight into where Woolf sees herself in terms of the cultural and social landscape of interwar Britain

1. “[T]he Battle of the Brows troubles, I am told, the evening air, since the finest minds of our age have lately been engaged in debating, not without that passion which befits a noble cause, what a highbrow is and what a lowbrow, which is better and which is worse.”

Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow"

- Highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow can broadly be aligned with upper class, middle class, and working class, though relate more to cultural values and tastes than to economic standing
- In Woolf’s letter, highbrow defined by intellect and the mind, which form purpose of highbrow life and pursuits:

2. "Now there can be no two opinions as to what a highbrow is. He is the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea. That is why I have always been so proud to be called highbrow. That is why, if I could be more of a highbrow I would. I honour and respect highbrows."

Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow"

- Highbrows separate from but also inherently dependent on lowbrows:

3. "[H]ighbrows, for some reason or another, are wholly incapable of dealing successfully with what is called real life. That is why, and here I come to a point that is often surprisingly ignored, they honour so wholeheartedly and depend so completely upon those who are called lowbrows."

Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow"

- Lowbrow, in contrast, described in physical terms, making a living through work; purpose in life is to live and to survive, not to think about life:

4. "By a lowbrow is meant of course a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life. That is why I honour and respect lowbrows and I have never known a highbrow who did not. [...] All that

lowbrows do is of surpassing interest and wonder to me, because, in so far as I am a highbrow, I cannot do things myself." **Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow"**

- Literary and artistic production - the act of depicting and reflecting on life - are realm of the highbrow; their works depict lives of the lowbrow, who consume the results of highbrow intellectual labour rather than creating own narratives or images of their lives:

5. ""You have only to stroll along the Strand on a wet winter's night and watch the crowds lining up to get into the movies [...] in order to see what their lives look like. Since they are lowbrows, engaged magnificently and adventurously in riding full tilt from one end of life to the other in pursuit of a living, they cannot see themselves doing it. [...] It is one of the prime necessities of life to them to be shown what life looks like. And the highbrows, of course, are the only people who can show them. Since they are the only people who do not do things, they are the only people who can see things being done." **Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow"**

- Cf. Tutorial Module and changes to literary landscape in 1950s with working-class writers; also continuing preoccupation with class mobility
- Middlebrow is that which cannot easily be categorised, not geographically, not in terms of economic status, not in terms of taste and cultural consumption; for Woolf, middlebrow is unsettlingly "between" and "betwixt":

6. "They are the go-betweens; they are the busy-bodies who run from one to the other with their tittle tattle and make all the mischief the middlebrows, I repeat. But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between. They do not live in Bloomsbury which is on high ground; nor in Chelsea, which is on low ground. [...] The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige." **Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow"**

- Anxiety about distinctions: middlebrow comprised of aspects of both lowbrow and highbrow; economically speaking, they work for a living, but also have the time and money for artistic pursuits
- In 1949, Russell Lynes, editor of *Harper's Magazine*, published satirical chart of the brows in *Life Magazine*, breaking down middlebrow into upper and lower middlebrow
- In article predating the chart, Lynes pointed out that middlebrow money made possible highbrow intellectual and artistic pursuits
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The Middlebrow Strikes Back

- Evelyn Waugh called stream-of-consciousness narratives, and particular the work of Joyce "gibberish".
- E. M. Delafield, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930); example of middlebrow interwar women's fiction
- Published in *Time and Tide* (magazine that combined middlebrow and highbrow fiction)

- Delafied is a middlebrow writer, and her protagonist is a middlebrow reader and writer
- Provincial Lady finds finds modernist writing difficult and is not well versed in poetry;
- Approves of accessible Victorian and twentieth-century fiction; dislikes sensationalism.
- We see this when she selects her reading material for her holiday in France:
 7. “Question of books to be taken abroad undecided till late hour last night. Robert says, Why take any? [...] Finally decide on *Little Dorrit* and *The Daisy Chain*, with *Jane Eyre* in coat pocket. Should prefer to be the kind of person who is inseparable from volume of Keats, or even Jane Austen, but cannot compass this.”

E. M. Delafied, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), p. 86
- Provincial Lady comments directly on modernist fiction, lamenting her own inadequacy as a reader as well as attacking experimental fiction such as Woolf’s:
 8. “I am asked what I think of Harriet Hume but am unable to say, as I Have not read it. Have depressed feeling that this is going to another case of *Orlando*, about which was perfectly able to talk most intelligently until I read it, and found myself unfortunately unable to understand it.”

E. M. Delafied, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), p. 5
- Narrator rejects Woolf’s more formally experimental texts, such as *Orlando* (1928), and has a strong preference for realist fiction, such as that of Dickens and the Brontës.
- Also comments explicitly on what we find in Woolf’s unsent “Middlebrow” letter, namely the elitist nature of modernist writing and reviewing:
 9. “Unknown benefactor sends me copy of new Literary Review, which seems to be full of personal remarks from well-known writers about other well-known writers. This perhaps more amusing to themselves than to the average reader. Moreover, competitions most alarmingly literary, and I return with immense relief to old friend *Time and Tide*”.

E. M. Delafied, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), p. 117

Taste & Value

- Is “good” literature timeless?
- Is “good” literature perceived as “good” at any one point in time?
- Who determines what makes good literature?
- Do quality and meaning lie within the text itself? Or is it attributed to it by readers?
- Is quality and its perception determined by historical context?
- Why do texts go in and out of fashion?
- What is the role of the critic?