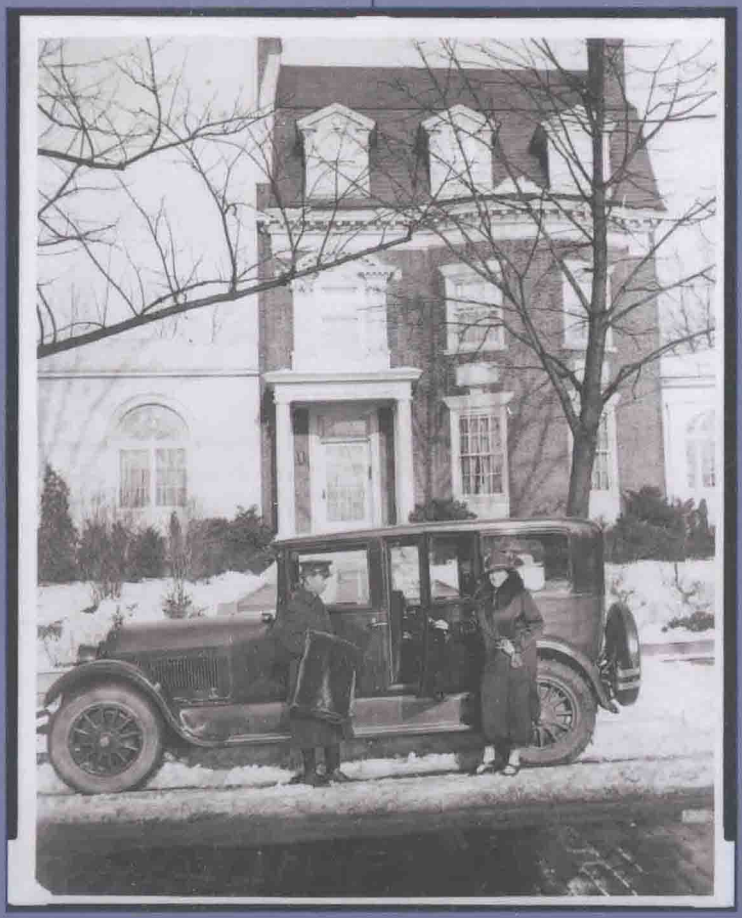
American Literature Readings in the 21st Century



# The Middle Class in the Great Depression

## Popular Women's Novels of the 1930s

Jennifer Haytock

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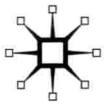



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*To*
*Elnora Brosius King*
*Alice King Cross*
*Mary Cross Haytock*
*Nancy Branstrom Haytock*
*and*
*Elizabeth Grace Haytock*

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*Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism*

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# Contents

INTRODUCTION

# Popular Women's Literature, Class, and the Great Depression

In *This Is on Me* (1940), a combination of short stories and autobiography, Katharine Brush lightly explains that she lost prestige as an author during the Great Depression because "literary fashion and critical opinion underwent a change, and suddenly no short story had any merit of any kind unless it was about the underprivileged—with special emphasis on boxcar hoboes, for some reason. All else was trivial" (257). Brush's remarks could also serve as an assessment of subsequent literary criticism about the decade, which tends to emphasize representations of poverty, labor, and radicalism. In contrast, this study starts by acknowledging that during the Depression, the middle and upper classes did not go away. As historian T. H. Watkins notes,

> If nearly 25 percent of the labor force was unemployed, after all, that left 75 percent making some kind of living—and some of the living was reasonably comfortable. If 300,000 businesses had gone under, there were still 1.9 million providing some kind of service or product—and some of those surviving businesses flourished. Though they found their fondest certitudes sorely tested, those in the upper levels of the middle class who had weathered the worst buffetings of the depression did not vanish into the unforgiving maw of history. (104)

People reconsidered their budgets, of course, and it even occurred to John P. Morgan, Jr., that selling his personal yacht in 1932 might not be in the best taste since, he noted, "There are so many suffering from lack of work, and even from actual hunger, that it is both wiser and kinder not to flaunt such luxurious amusement in the face of the public" (quoted in Watkins 105–06). Many people still had money, they still bought books, and they did not always want to read or write about the plight of the poor or radical solutions to the injustices of capitalism. While they were not necessarily indifferent to those issues,

writers and readers also focused on the problems associated with having money, including how to spend it, how to keep it, and how it participates in constituting identity.

In this project, I investigate how US women writers in the 1930s used strategies of realism to reflect and engage with their world. I argue that popular representations of middle-class life provide a window into the cultural, economic, and political forces that shaped women's lives and opportunities in that decade. Ordinary, daily life—that is, the matrix of activities, routines, and relationships that make up an individual's regular and recurring experience—does not naturally happen; it must be made, and the life that is made bears the marks of the forces that allow or inhibit it. Realist fiction in the 1930s portrays a range of changes in American life, from technological advances in household labor to a reexamination of the American Dream. It is particularly revelatory of class markers and class boundaries: through repetition of habit and customs, daily life establishes and reinforces the gestures, thoughts, and attitudes that create and perpetuate class identity, however illusory such an identity may be. Stories of marriage and family life are particularly telling, for such tales reveal the stresses and fault lines tested by social and economic circumstances.

## Family, the Middle Class, and the Middlebrow

The structure of and relationships within families change over time, often in response to outside expectations. For white middle class individuals, the 1920s saw the rise of the "companionate marriage," as popularized by Judge Ben Lindsey; in *The Companionate Marriage*, Lindsey and Wainwright Evans argued for easier divorce laws for couples with no children. They also exposed an older generation to how their children drew connections among love, marriage, and sex. Beginning approximately at the turn of the century, American youth moved away from an insistence on women's chastity, in part because of the increased availability of birth control, and began to equate sex and love. With a woman's greater sexual freedom, or at least the freedom to enjoy sex, came the expectation that she would be not only her husband's domestic helpmate but also his partner in sexual desire and expression.[1] When marriage became less about creating and supporting a family and more about love, individuals became more willing to end marriages if they no longer felt that love.

By the 1930s, according to Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, the "companionate family" was the primary familial model. During the

early part of the twentieth century, the structure of the American family was greatly influenced by developments in the study and practice of psychology; parents were encouraged to have emotional connections with their children rather than figure only as disciplinarians and moral examples.[2] The rise of professions, particularly social work, created a wealth of expertise on childrearing and housekeeping. Women were expected to keep up with the latest scientific methods for managing their families and homes. The Depression put the companionate familial model under pressure and is considered to have two diverging effects on the family: it pulled some families together, united in suffering, and it broke others apart, as men deserted their families because they could not support them and more children were placed in institutions (136). Further, Watkins describes a trend among family men who suffered from helplessness and even impotence; he quotes a psychiatrist who recounts both men and women feeling "inwardly frantic with fear and [ . . . ] nearing the end of their rope in the struggle to adjust their needs for food and shelter, as well as their conceptions of themselves, their normal wills to power, and their self-esteem to the thwarting that loss of job necessitates" (55). Mintz and Kellogg and Watkins cite lower marriage rates in the 1930s, a drop in childbirth, increased incidences of marital desertion, and a reduction in divorce rates as fewer couples could afford to end unhappy marriages (Mintz and Kellogg 136–37; Watkins 55–56). While poor families had always negotiated the impact of income on their emotional relationships, middle-class families were now required to do so to a greater degree than previous generations.

In 1930s fiction about middle-class families, characters often demonstrate confusion over what family relationships mean and can withstand, only some of which is directly related to questions of money. For example, if sex is an expression of love, what is the meaning of adultery? If an individual falls in love with someone outside one's class, which takes precedence—the call of love or loyalty to class? What happens to the family when children follow different values than their parents? If it is a husband and father's job to support the family financially, what happens when he can no longer do so?

These questions drew the attention of women writers during the Great Depression. And there are other stories: those of women working outside the heterosexual family structure to find security and fulfill their dreams, of women struggling to hold onto middle-class status when circumstances work against them, of women reexamining themselves and the world they thought they knew amidst violent events, of women seeking success in the professional world. Novels by

women who addressed these issues frequently fall into a category of fiction that the scholars who judge what texts are taught and studied seldom consider valuable. Critics have neglected realist novels of the 1930s partly because these texts lack modernist characteristics that scholars have privileged for decades: they are not concerned with the grotesque or the traumatic, such as the work of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, and they may seem superficial in comparison to the psychological depths of novels by Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton. The authors addressed here used the strategies of realism to represent the forces that shape women's lives and the rhythms of conventional experience.

In her classic study *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan challenges the idea that realist literature sits apart from social history. She places realism in "relation to social change, to the representation of class difference, and to the emergence of a mass culture" (8). Further, she argues, realism serves "as a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change—not just to assert a dominant power but often to assuage fears of powerlessness" (10). Finally, Kaplan describes a realism that represents a "social whole"—that is, realism depicts social classes as a means of navigating class conflict (11). While I largely agree with Kaplan's interpretation of realism's goals and strategies, by the 1930s, the nature of social pressures had changed since the time of Howells and Wharton. Immigrants were still seen as a threat, but perhaps more pressing was the threat from within: the nagging sense that the American Dream might not hold true—that not everyone has a chance at success, that all social and economic movement is not upward, and that children might not do better than their parents. Literature of the Great Depression engages the American Dream possibly more and more directly than literature of any other decade. It was one thing for a middle-class, native-born American to envision an immigrant face on poverty; it was quite another to see one's neighbor having to give up his house. Women were established in the professional work force, and advertising and consumerism increasingly informed individuals' sense of themselves. Further, literature appeared in a different marketplace than it did twenty or thirty years earlier, and it competed against "talkies" and radio to a much larger extent than ever before.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of "middlebrow fiction," a category of literature that has drawn the attention of literary critics in recent decades. In *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence W. Levine traces the origins of the categorization of culture in the United States through the nineteenth

century into the twentieth, arguing that an increasingly fragmented society contributed to a corresponding desire to protect and control access to "culture." Levine considers the influences of a new wave of immigrants, the growth of specialization and professionalism, and an expanding middle class as contributing factors in the hierarchization of culture. Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* and Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books: The-Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* recount the growth of an industry devoted to middle-class yearning for culture and education. Middlebrow fiction seeks to provide pleasure to readers while, in Radway's view, it often allows them to remain complacent in their social, economic, and political worldview (12–13). Radway argues that readers found emotional satisfaction in these kinds of texts as they experienced other lives vicariously: "[the reader] was to inhabit the parallel self provided by a book, to feel the way it vibrated both physically and emotionally in response to its own context, and to participate in a difference that was rendered comprehensible," an experience particularly attractive for individuals alienated by modern life and the isolation of professionalism (284–85). Radway's and Rubin's studies have been foundational in understanding the emotional and economic function of middlebrow literature as well as identifying the particular cultural needs it filled.

Building on their work, other scholars have examined the category of middlebrow literature and explored its history and meanings. In *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States*, Amy L. Blair argues that part of the foundation for middlebrow reading was laid by the turn-of-the-century strategy of "reading up," a practice in which "a reader approaches a text because experts have deemed it 'the best' thing to read and reads in the interest of self-interest" (3). "Reading up," Blair explains, is an economic investment: reading the right novel in a particular way is "an outward sign of, and means to, upward mobility" (2). In *America the Middlebrow*, Jaime Harker identifies "middlebrow authorship" as a writing strategy employed intentionally (18): "Middlebrow authors assume a sympathetic communion between reader and writer; the text offers vicarious experience, understanding, and wisdom" (19). Harker argues that middlebrow fiction can challenge its readers to evoke social and political change. In his expansive study *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920–1960*, Gordon Hutner examines attitudes toward and the function of realist texts in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly those that meet the criteria of what he refers to as "better fiction"—not

the "best," but still pretty good. He argues not for re-reading and re-assessment of individual texts and authors but rather regrets the loss of a "class" of books: realism in mid-twentieth century United States. Hutner argues that this literature was "a valuable means of circulating not only cultural capital, but also social awareness" and that it "represent[s] a rudimentary vision of some relative cohesiveness of American life" (4). Like Harker, he sees "better fiction" as promoting change, not overtly but through "a refocusing of attention" (8).

While these critics often investigate readers' responses to middlebrow novels and examine these texts collectively, I am interested in engaging with the novels themselves and looking at what they reveal about gender and middle-class values and perspectives during the 1930s. That is, I close read novels that critics have tended to treat broadly because the details in these novels matter, just as they do in any other text: realism is its own form, and although as a form it tries to hide its constructedness, it is, nevertheless, constructed. In fact, because it attempts to present itself as transparent, realist fiction often richly rewards careful examination; its writers, intentionally or not, build their narratives on assumptions about their society that close reading can uncover. Further, like Hutner and Harker, I see value in examining the issues to which middlebrow or "better" fiction directs readers' consideration. Those issues include marriage, parenting, generational clashes over values, housekeeping and budgeting, wage-earning work, community, and aspirational desire.

Despite current critical distinctions between modernism and other literature, readers of the decade did not necessarily separate their reading by these categories. Nothing stopped someone from reaching for a modernist novel one day and a middlebrow work the next. Indeed, the authors of essays collected in Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith's volume *Middlebrow Moderns* also demonstrate that many middlebrow authors wrote in dialogue with writers considered to be modernists. Further, as Catherine Keyser points out in her study *Playing Smart*, leading magazines of the period such as "*Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* [. . .] popularized the innovations of literary and artistic modernism even as they promoted bourgeois status and consumer pleasure" (8). Nor is all literature easily categorized. Keyser investigates ways that some women writers "adopted the deceptive air of triviality associated with these middlebrow publications to expose the anxieties riddling modern hierarchies of class identity, gender norms, and even literary reputation" (7); she argues that such magazine writers as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dorothy Parker, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Dawn Powell, and Mary McCarthy used strategies of "smartness"

and irony to negotiate prevailing categories of identity and literature. Given the textual continuities and dialogues between modernist and middlebrow literature and their overlapping readership, my attention to 1930s middlebrow novels helps fill a gap in our understanding of how writers and readers conceived of themselves and their world.

Literature of the Great Depression and representations of women during that time have attracted critical attention, but scholarship about literature from this period tends to focus on radicalism and work: Constance Coiner's *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur*, Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*, and Laura Hapke's *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*. Although these studies are important for understanding how individuals, and particularly women, envisioned their relationship to work and politics during this era, women who did not write about radicalism have been largely ignored. I propose to examine the writing of some of these women who, while often more privileged and conservative, nevertheless reflected on the changing nation and how those changes manifested themselves in women's daily lives. Even some women who did address the disastrous effects of the economy in the 1930s in their writing did so in such a way as to raise issues other than those of labor and poverty, and I examine a selection of these texts for their representation of women's daily life and their engagement with the meaning of class identity.

## Class in Academic Discourse

Discussions of class used to start with Marx and hence with the connection between labor and capital, specifically the interplay between them labeled "class struggle." American literature of the 1930s still lends itself easily to such conceptions, as many authors were deeply committed to radical agendas and Marxist ideology. More broadly, however, both historical and literary approaches to class have moved beyond Marx. Burton J. Bledstein, for example, in his introduction to the collaboratively edited *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, insists on the inadequacy of Marxism to represent the lived experience of generations of Americans. Class has come to be regarded as something between a fixed economic category and a social construction. In his introductory essay to *Reworking Class*, the sociologist John R. Hall argues that class is a social construct that remains tied to economics. He insists, further,

that "individuals are not *members* of *a* class; they *engage* in various class *actions*—both individually and collectively, in everyday life and in relation to extraordinary events, and not just in relation to production and occupations" (21 emphasis in original). Hall locates these "class actions" in the activities of "everyday life, through networks of family, friendship and acquaintance, neighborhoods, communities, and education to obtain skills and credentials" (24). Hall does not completely separate social class from economic markets, but he also points out that individuals operate in a number of different markets, arguing that "people may undertake exchanges involving cultural, social, and moral capital in heterogeneous markets" (27). One of those markets is the imaginative, or literary: buying a book is a social and economic act, as is reading it; and within the pages of that book, "class actions" are represented and imaginatively experienced.

Novels of women's lives have been considered to be the sites where the middle class is created. Stories of courtship and marriage, often in their very un-exceptionality, delineate the ordinary and blur it into the category of the middle class. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, her study of the politics of the British novel, Nancy Armstrong has proposed a direct correlation between middle-class identity, the novel, and gender:

> It is only by thus subordinating all social differences to those based on gender that these novels bring order to social relationships. Granting all this, one may conclude that the power of the middle classes had everything to do with that of middle-class love. And if this contention holds true, one must also agree that middle-class authority rested in large part upon the authority that novels attributed to women and in this way designated as specifically female. (4)

In this way, Armstrong, like Hall, separates class identity, at least in part, from income, and other literary critics have followed this thinking. In their edited collection, *Rethinking Class*, Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore argue for a "more modest and more flexible" approach to class than that proposed by Marx: "The modesty comes from our sense that the boundaries of class are unstable, that the experience of it is uneven, that it is necessary but not sufficient for the constitution of human identities" (2). They treat class "as a relationally derived construct rather than a self-executing entity" (3), an approach that allows scholars to consider the "relations" by and through which class is constructed, experienced, and represented. Following Armstrong, Dimock, and Gilmore, I too focus on the behaviors that