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Constructing the American Dream: The GI Bill, Middlebrow Literary Culture, and the Politics of Well-Being in the Mid-Twentieth Century

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Hannah Grace Lanneau

Committee in charge:

Professor Meg Wesling, Chair
Professor Amelia Glaser
Professor Rebecca Jo Plant
Professor Ameeth Vijay

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the men and women in my life who have sacrificed to preserve for others the promises of the Dream discussed in this dissertation; and to my parents, for encouraging and supporting me in pursuit of my smaller dreams—the great, the silly, the difficult, and those they did not always understand, such as this.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASE	Armed Services Editions
BoMC	Book-of-the-Month Club
CBW	Council on Books in Wartime
GAN	Great American Novel
GPB	*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*
OE	Overseas Editions
OWI	Office of War Information (Department of Defense)
TE	Transatlantic Editions

PREFACE

The focus of this dissertation—on the political and ethical implications of print culture, popular reading, and middlebrow literature within the context of WWII and the postwar era—is motivated by my firm belief that because literature impacts readers' lived experiences as well as the wider cultures which reader-citizens inhabit, the development of an understanding of the ethics of reading and literary study are essential to understanding many areas of ethics which impact the well-being of fellow citizens. My dissertation argues that the lasting legacies of the material objects of a particular American Dream demonstrate the interdependencies of literature, policy, and U.S. culture, and makes clear the political and ethical impact of engagement with a variety of literary forms. As the title suggests, the American Dream is in part constructed *by* and has immense consequences *for* the well-being of those living in the U.S., including citizen-readers. The American Dream I discuss in this dissertation is, to use the language of Laruen Berlant, *cruelly optimistic*, "because whatever the *content* of the attachment is"—in this case, the material objects I will examine—"the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what is to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 24). A dream constructed for the few, but positioned as achievable to all, highlights the underlying tension between the ethic of the Dream—the "bootstrap" work ethic rooted in the Protestant Ethic on which the nation was founded—and its materialistic impulse.

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I must express my very profound gratitude for my family—for your support through the highs and lows of graduate study, and for helping me live a full life beyond the keyboard as I prepared drafts of the dissertation.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude for everyone who has directly or indirectly impacted the course of my work. This manuscript is a testament to the incredible academic, social, and familial communities that have supported me throughout my academic career, and for whom I am forever grateful.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Constructing the American Dream: The GI Bill, Middlebrow Literary Culture, and the Politics of Well-Being in the Mid-Twentieth Century

by

Hannah Grace Lanneau

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Meg Wesling, Chair

This dissertation argues that the Armed Services Editions (1942-1947) as an inherently middlebrow project, together with the post- WWII GI bill education and housing benefits, cohered and solidified an enduring fiction of the American Dream as one in which hard work can yield the success and comfort of suburban middle-class life. The middlebrow nature of the

American Dream is intimately connected to the concept of *military masculinity*, a particular conception of gender presentation and formation which was perceived as essential to winning the War. Discussing conceptions of American identity, the middlebrow, and the military masculine together brings us closer to an understanding of the American Dream—and thus, of the fiction of American identity—as innately middlebrow and intimately connected to the fiction of the inherent masculinity of the military, which in its democratizing and homogenizing education is itself a kind of middlebrow institution. I argue that the middlebrow is incredibly dependent on and entangled with print culture, which both dictates and reflects how one ought to act, what one ought to buy, and what one ought to aspire to—and thus the ASEs, as a recreational reading project, both complicated conceptions of the middlebrow as feminine and perpetuated ideas about the American Dream which middlebrow culture ascribes to. The American Dream is a dream of striving and invention, and the middlebrow aesthetic argues that the evolution-of-self that is involved can be *bought*— can be constructed out of an accumulation of objects, or images, or identities contrived through the purchase of books or commodities. Thus, the American Dream and the middlebrow are inextricably linked and mutually constitutive. This discussion necessitates exploration of the literature itself as well as policy, economics, critical gender studies, and memory theory. Although perhaps seemingly disparate pools of data, these areas of information help create a full picture of "Middle(brow) America" as it came to be in the 1950s—a time still shrouded in nostalgia today.

INTRODUCTION

> *"[Our goal is to find] the book that does not idealize war, but makes you feel that some things are worth fighting for and makes you wish you had been there"*
>
> Books as Weapons In The War of Ideas (1942)

In 1942, just after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a group of librarians, publishers, booksellers, authors, and military servicemembers founded a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing cheap paperback books as "weapons in the war of ideas" against fascism and in particular against the Nazi regime. The Council on Books in Wartime (CBW), as they called themselves, was not a government body but was heavily regulated by the Office of War Information (renamed the Department of Defense in 1946). Their most ambitious but most successful project was the Armed Services Editions (ASEs), a collection of 1,322 titles sent to servicemen and women as recreation materials during training and mobilization. During the project's lifetime (1942-1947), the CBW deployed over 122,951,031 paperback books—making this the largest paperback publishing feat yet, forever changing the U.S. publishing industry, and by extension, influencing college campus culture and the book-buying habits of the middle class. The ASEs introduced millions of soldiers to the joy of accessible reading, and this intellectual interest was further encouraged by the post-WWII GI bill education benefits to which servicemen and women were entitled after their tours of duty. As the war came to a close, the housing entitlements of the post-WWII GI bill dramatically altered the course of the U.S. housing market and city planning, resulting in the "new frontier" of the suburban landscape. This dissertation argues that the WWII recreation projects and postwar veterans' assistance programs helped to cement the long-standing vision of the American Dream as the suburban materialist utopia (inhabited by college-educated parents, their children, and perhaps a pet) manifested

through a pull-oneself-up-by-the-bootstraps work ethic. The concepts of American identity and the American Dream to which I refer in this dissertation are in many ways dependent on the paradigm of military masculinity and the elusive concept of middlebrow culture; and thus it is important to demonstrate the relevance of viewing "America" and the American Dream as inherently middlebrow concepts in order to fully understand the importance of the ASE project, the impact of the post-WWII GI bill, and why the two should be studied together as producers of the enduring mythology of the American Dream.

At the 1942 roundtable on the topic of "Books as Weapons in the War of Ideas," jointly hosted by the Council on Books in Wartime and The New York Times, panel members discussed what kinds of books are useful in times of war, and for whom. Although many panelists promoted books of military technique and strategy, a few brought up the importance of cheap paperback fiction. As one panel member argued, the question of books in war—and by extension, he claimed, the question of books in society—is inherently a question of access. The reason for this is that if books are too expensive, few will read them: "An army in wartime is a wartime army, and actually an army is exactly the same as a peacetime population … We must have cheap books" (3). Colonel Greene—a graduate of West Point and himself an author—responded that servicemen not only can, but *should* read, and should be encouraged by the nation to do so through funded book programs where cheap paperback printing technologies could allow for a wide variety in terms of selection. When specific fiction titles were brought up, CBW chairman Fadiman "wondered whether morale in the Army itself… is something that can actually be created by means of books, even partially" (37). When asked by his peers whether books really matter in wartime—whether the soldier actually experiences a "stiffening of feeling" when reading a book—Colonel Greene stressed the importance of literature of all kinds

for the purpose of boosting morale: "I know many books… were read by soldiers in the World War. In this war you have an army nearly 50 per cent high school graduates, or better. Therefore, there are far many more books read [in this War]" (38). In contrast to contemporary stereotypes of enlisted servicemembers as less literate (and implicitly less intelligent), Greene and others argued that a wide range of print materials be available to servicemembers of all ranks in all branches—marking the ASEs as a distinctly middlebrow project.

The choice to examine the military—and, more specifically, servicemember-oriented recreation and education projects— as producers of the nation's attractive and notoriously elusive "American Dream" might not be an obvious one. For me, however, branches of the military and its larger umbrella, the Department of Defense, provide a microcosm of the United States in which American identity and American dreams (lowercase "d") coalesce. I have heard, from countless acquaintances and strangers alike, from Korean War veterans to current servicemembers, that the military apparatus is, in many ways, viewed as the great equalizer. The institution of the military suggests that whatever your background—wealthy, poor, educated, uneducated, Southern, Northern, Midwestern—you can become a sailor, a marine, a soldier, just like every other sailor, marine, soldier[1]. Whether this homogenization is positive or negative in specific ways is not the interest of this dissertation. What remains paramount about any study of the military and its recreation/ education projects as producers of a particular vision of the

---

[1] An important caveat to note: this statement implies that this opportunity is available to all, it is misleading to think that *anyone* can serve in the military. There have always been additional requirements which disqualify a number of individuals (including disease, medical conditions or disabilities which require significant time, hospitalization, or restricted geographical area, or are exacerbated by tasks required for duty). These requirements have been used in recruitment materials as a positive, however, stressing the significance of servicemembers' selection and participation. See, for example, the Marine Corps recruitment website, the main page of which reads in bold: "A SKILLSET DERIVED FROM A MINDSET: It takes something special to be a Marine, but where do these exceptional attributes exist? Are they in the body? In the mind? Or is it more likely that they're found some place deep? IT is the mindset of a Marine that stands apart… To be the force that is most ready when the Nation is least ready. To be prepared for anything by training for everything. To overcome every obstacle in front of us, with a fighting spirit that propels us" (Marines.com).

American Dream is the disconnection between stated goals and the cultural ability of the nation to fulfill those goals. In other words—the military provides what some have argued is one of the most direct routes to one's achievement of the American Dream[2], but is this Dream actually achievable by every soldier, every marine, every sailor?

The military as an institution is also relevant to discussions of the American Dream because, as I argue, the Dream itself is closely tied to and in many ways founded on the concepts of the middlebrow and the paradigm of military masculinity, both of which I define in greater detail later in the introduction, as well as in subsequent chapters. Aaron Belkin argues that "military masculinity has consisted of beliefs, practices, and attributes that often have enabled individuals to claim a great deal of authority, perhaps more than any other form of masculinity, on the basis of their relationships with military institutions and ideas" (Belkin 4). After the Spanish-American War (1898), literature began representing military service as "paradigmatic of what it meant to be a real man" and the model soldier became the archetypal model citizen (Belkin 7). Christina Jarvis (2004) argues that during WWII, the cultural significance of the American male body (and thus of military masculinity) was demonstrated through such media attention as the transformation of Uncle Sam from a spindly, slender old man to an aggressive, muscular character, as well as by the lengths to which the White House strove to conceal that FDR used a wheelchair. While war heroes have been revered and considered masculine role models at different times throughout U.S. history[3], the association of military institutions with inherent masculinity—and of military masculinity with inherent democratic values—

[2] As I will continue to argue throughout this dissertation, military entitlements like the GI Bill and VA loans have effectively subsidized higher education and housing for (mostly white) servicemembers who fulfill their enlistment obligations, making the particular 1950s vision of the American Dream I refer to here seemingly very achievable.
[3] See K. Harvey, "The History of Masculinity, circa 1650-1800" (2005), and Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996)

significantly increased in urgency during the World Wars as well as by the anxieties about gender in the first phase of the Cold War. Similarly, I argue that the middlebrow, which I define in greater detail below, is indivisibly connected to the consumerist drive of the American Dream and is inherently democratic in the sense that it makes an object or idea widely accessible to a middleclass (and even working class) consumer. As military masculinity becomes emblematic of what it means to be a "real man" in the American imagination, so too does the materialistic drive of the middlebrow serve as a reminder of the freedoms and wealth afforded to U.S. citizens[4]. Although the middlebrow, the military, literary consumer habits, and the American Dream may seem unlikely bedfellows, I argue that these coalesce to form the basic building blocks of the "American Way of Life," the relevance of which continues to be demonstrated by politicians, the media, and advertising in the U.S. today.

Although this dissertation examines the military as a microcosm of the United States, it is not the sole or even primary concern of my argument. Books—or, more broadly, *print media*—also matter to the construction and maintenance of the American Dream because of the way in which canonization operates within the arena of memory politics. In a special issue of *American Literature* titled "What Should We Teach?" (1993), Paul Lauter revisits his (and fellow editors') choices in assembling the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Lauter argues that although the original goal of the *Heath* had been to present a "conception of American culture as multiple and often contradictory," the editions evidence that "in making and organizing our selections we did not always keep this fundamental idea before our eyes" (327). Lauter uses as his example the anthology's presentation of the Modern Period—the very same literary period I examine in my

[4] The freedom to spend has been used by politicians like Richard Nixon to contrast the wealth and freedoms of the United States with of personal freedom symbolized by the Soviet Union, and encouraged by pieces of legislation, including several of the "American Dream Act(s)."

third chapter. Lauter critiques their editorial separation of the Harlem Renaissance as a category distinct from other Modernist Literature "in part as an effort to suggest the importance of a cultural movement alternative in many ways to the dominantly white (and often explicitly racist) modernism of Pound, Eliot, and their compatriots," but which still inadvertently privileges canonical high modernism by this degree of separation (328). Lauter's central question—"How might we better present students with the complex, conflicted narrative to which our work [of anthologizing American literature] is committed?" (328)—is in many ways related to my own motivating questions for the dissertation. While Lauter's question is at the root of my investigation, the actual material of his anthology is not.

Jodi Melamed problematizes the *Heath* and projects like it, characterizing it as "representation" which in practice replace "literature as the practice of self-determination," regardless of editors' intentions (Melamed 112). I acknowledge that neoliberal multiculturalism is problematic, and do not seek to reify the problems of neoliberal multiculturalist approaches to reading literature as "an effective strategy to recognize and unify the multiple cultures of the U.S. nation"; rather, the focus of my investigation predates the "Keynesian policy to remedy adversity" via the "official antiracism" of the 1980s which Melamed critiques in *Represent and Destroy*, and seeks rather to better understand the root of this impulse and its broader implications to the study of American literature and culture. I argue that the particular American Dream I examine in this dissertation is paramount to understanding the ongoing conception of American identity employed by popular media, advertising, and U.S. politics. The questions at the heart of this dissertation thus examine perhaps unlikely combinations of cultural apparatuses: How does an examination of military education projects lead us to a deeper understanding of the American Dream as conceptualized by the entire nation—military and civilian? Why does this

particular conception of the American Dream endure, and why does it matter? How are the military and the middlebrow connected, and how does this connection deepen our understanding of the American Dream and its consequences?

Such a discussion of military projects and the construction of the American Dream necessitates attention to the essential elements which make up, trouble, re-assemble, and immortalize the idea of the American Dream—nostalgia and memory. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that war is a powerful memory-making tool, and that understanding how a culture remembers a war is paramount to understanding a nation. In his book, *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen argues that "Emotion and ethnocentrism are key to the memory industry as it turns wars and experiences into sacred objects and soldiers into untouchable mascots of memory, as found in the American fetish for the so-called Greatest Generation who fought the so-called Good War" (13). Because war is in fact fought by the nation and not by the soldier alone, "Thinking of war as an isolated action carried out by soldiers transforms the soldier into the face and body of war, when in truth he is only its appendage" (225). This realization that war makes a nation, rather than an army of soldiers fighting a war, highlights the devastating (yet realized) potential of war stories.

Nguyen claims that war stories are important because, as we know, not everything can or will be remembered, and some things will inevitably be forgotten—war stories thus distill the image or identity of a given war, authorized by the nation. He argues that *just memory*, or a memory which seeks to acknowledge both oneself and the other as simultaneously and alternately human and inhuman in war, is essential to stopping the 'war machine'. Because war

is profitable, not just as an act but as national memory[5], war will continue so long as we consume it as entertainment without accepting the banal with the glory.

> The spectacular gore of a certain kind of true war story distracts us from the dull hum of the war machine in which we live, a massive mechanism greased with banalities, bolted together by triviality, and enabled by passive consent… So far as we imagine wars to be dangerous (but thrilling), wars will not end. Perhaps when we see how boring wars actually are, how war seeps into everyday life, then we might want to imagine stopping wars (Nguyen 232)

It is with a similar impulse that I seek to tackle a seemingly tangential "true war story" (to use Nguyen's language). This project does not seek to reject the glory of war as an aspect of American identity by centering instead the horrors of WWII, with which we are all too familiar; rather, I resist both the glory and the 'guts' offered by WWII as a topic by focusing instead on the seemingly mundane and the banal of wartime recreation and postwar education and home life. Rather than question how the nation contributed to and was influenced by the war machine during the 1940s and '50s, I seek instead to examine how the quotidian realities, benefits, and hardships of the war in turn impacted the American *reader*, higher education, middlebrow culture, and home life, and how that influence produced an enduring mythology of the American Dream and its material objects.

Thus, while this dissertation does not examine the "war story" in particular, it is in itself a kind of "true war story." As I will demonstrate, analyzing selected ASEs and the ways in which stories circulated *during* the war clarify the ways in which they in fact become intimately woven into American cultural mythologies *about* war, national identity, and the American Dream. Nguyen claims that "Our ambivalence about war's identity simply expresses ambivalence about our own identities, which are collectively inseparable from the wars our nations have fought"

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[5] Nguyen argues that phenomenon is evident in films like *Apocalypse Now*, which aim to "refight the Vietnam War on global movie screens," with such regularity that "[n]o matter the horrors that Americans may see on their screens… the viewers who are not physically present at those events are anesthetized into resignation" (14)

(Nguyen 18), and so I seek to examine that woven identity, made up of war, nation, and self, particularly as it contributes or is connected to the mythology of the American Dream as a conglomeration of material objects, individual behaviors, and national values.

I. DEFINITIONS & HISTORICAL OVERVIEWS

The Middlebrow

By "middlebrow," I refer in a broad sense to the culture of aspiration (striving) which seeks to demonstrate belonging and status through the accumulation of material objects. My definition of the middlebrow is situated in conversation with, but also against, its more popular scholarly and lay-reader definitions. My definition seeks to reconcile, for example, why an institution like the Book-of-the-Month Club, whose selections have included agreed-upon classics as well as popular novels, would be considered middlebrow.

The middlebrow as an identifiable class of objects and style emerged in Europe and the United States in the 1920s. Printing innovations in the 1920s allowed for a great—and overwhelming—surge in print production which fundamentally changed book buying and reading as consumable entertainment in the United States. This incredible increase in the availability and variety of books created an anxiety among the broadening middle class to know what exactly one ought to read to be considered respectable, intelligent, and fashionable. Gordon Hutner questions the credence of the American education system's canon of American literature: "[W]hy should we believe that the books we [are] taught in school as representing American literary history are the best measure of our cultural heritage, the best lens for our vision of America?" (Hutner 60- 62). According to Hutner, the "opinion worth listening to" drastically shifted from the newspaper reviewer, to the magazine critic, to the scholar, and finally *away* from the scholar (but to whom?) throughout the 20th century.

In academic scholarship, defining the middlebrow is no less fraught than in popular forums. Like literary modernism, middlebrow literature is difficult to define, and scholars frequently disagree about what, exactly, constitutes middlebrow literature. While discussions of the term for the past several decades have frequently focused on the middlebrow as a highly feminized category, a few, like Kate MacDonald's *The Masculine Middlebrow* have troubled that conception by reading men's literary habits between 1880-1950 as no less middlebrow than women's[6]. Most scholarship about the masculine middlebrow, however, is troublingly limited to Britain and the Commonwealth. Rather than attempt to assert a new, clear definition of the middlebrow, my intervention in this field seeks to disrupt the traditional use of the term, and to consider its foundational connection to cultural assumptions about the United States in the twentieth century. I use the term to denote art, literature, and culture which is easily accessible, and which evokes or ascribes a level of aspiration, imitation, or self-improvement in pursuit of an imagined and idealized elite status, but concede that it is a broad and highly malleable term.

Janice Radway identifies the two primary sites of debate over the middlebrow as those which "have treated it primarily as an aesthetic phenomenon and seen in it only the bastardization of taste and false pretension" while "Others have argued that it must be considered an economic product, born of a transgressive union between art and a historically specific system of mass production, distribution, and consumption" (1994, 871). Whether considered an aesthetic phenomenon or an economic product, however, the middlebrow has typically been relegated to feminist scholarship. While a feminist analysis of the middlebrow is of course useful in that it "can demonstrate that the debate about the significance of the pretentious culture consumer served as a key ideological battlefield in the twentieth-century struggle over women's social

---

[6] MacDonald argues rather convincingly that the *Sherlock Holmes* series is perhaps the most middlebrow of masculine reading pursuits, in its subject matter, print history, and broad readership.

position," treating the middlebrow as a literary category distinct from modernism estranges it from historically, critically, and economically significant connections (1994, 872) . Although the term *middlebrow* did not appear in papers until 1927, the blueprint of middlebrow literature was already being sketched out in the early 1920s, in precisely the same period in which literary modernism took up considerable academic space. Nicola Humble claims that when works by modernists like Joyce and Woolf "became the models of what could be done with the novel… there was an increasing need to distinguish between such radical remakings of the form, and more conventional fictional narratives" (Humble 11). Humble considers middlebrow literature that which is primarily concerned with courtship and marriage, manners, and other domestic affairs in the woman's purview; yet, as is clear in even recent modernist scholarship, so too is the modernist novel. As Ronald Schleifer's *The Political Economy of Modernism* (2019) makes clear, the class warfare of the early 20th century produced "a literature of 'manners,' which was a 'literature about courtship and marriage and love and play and devotion and piety and style' (Mailer 122)," but also "a literature of 'adventure,' which, 'left to the sons of immigrants' and people from the lower middle class, attempted an explanation of the 'secrets of power' in social and personal life—that is, in the political economy of modernism" (Schleifer 213). Both of 'a literature of manners' and 'a literature of adventure' are considered modernist genres—and yet, a focus on domestic concerns and the entertainment value of adventure have also been said to characterize middlebrow literature. Thus, the *topic* of middlebrow literature is not what *makes* it middlebrow.

If topic, genre, and narrative style are not the defining aspects of middlebrow literature, it is necessary to expand the scope of analysis to consider the economic conditions shaping the era in which the middlebrow emerged. Schleifer considers "the advent of intangible assets and

inessential commodities" in the early 20th century "as part of a new constellation of structures of feeling and understanding" (213). At the turn of the century, the excess production and consumption of material goods necessitated new ways of "knowing" the world; industrial conditions also produced new class strata, which necessarily influenced the ways society and culture functioned. In his analysis of the lower middle class as an early 20th century phenomenon, Schleifer unwittingly affirms what I argue is the middlebrow aesthetic. This middlebrow aesthetic comes to manifest itself in the very fabric of the American Dream mythology I analyze in this dissertation, both

> in the ordinary lives of people, who live… in a future that is marked by consumption and desire whose fulfillments seem perpetually out of reach; and in the lives of extraordinary people, who seem to fulfill lower-middle-class desire, although most significantly by means of 'crimes of mobility,' which dispense with community and loyalty and progress through betrayal and swindle. (Schleifer 213)

Throughout my dissertation, my characterization of middlebrow institutions, aesthetic values, and heroic archetypes echo Schleifer's two sites of the lower-middle-class aesthetic mentioned above. Rather than simply conflate the middlebrow and the lower middle class, however, my analysis seeks to demonstrate the inextricable economic and aesthetic qualities of the American middlebrow, which relies heavily on the upward mobility promised by the American Dream. I engage Schleifer's scholarship also to demonstrate the futility of relegating the middlebrow to a category of literature distinct from modernism entirely.

I argue that the broad category of "middlebrow literature," fraught with gendered and at times racialized attempts at generic distinction, is ultimately an unsuccessful and undescriptive one. Merve Emre's four categories of "bad" reading and Rita Felski's four impetuses of reading—which she claims motivate and thus connect both professional and lay readers—reinforce the idea that engagement in extra-academic reading has been considered *paraliterary* or

middlebrow for decades. Tellingly, "reading to feel" (Emre) and "enchantment" (Felski) are closely related if not the same motive. Similarly, the paraliterary practice of "reading for information" (Emre), so decried by the academy, is one which Felski identifies as an essential truth of the literary text: "Literary theorists," she explains, "feel obliged to pour cold water on commonsense beliefs about what texts represent, yet such purifying rituals are unable to dislodge a widespread intuition that works of art reveal something about the way things are" (Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 81). Thus, as I will explore further in this dissertation, the attempt to distinguish middlebrow literature evidences a discomfort with sentimentality and, ultimately, with threats to hyper-masculinized cultural models of reading and being in postwar "America."

John Guillory famously noted that "middlebrow" and "America" seem incompatible because there is no true ruling class per se in the United States. The ruling class, he argues, characterizes the middlebrow by their resistance to it and by the middle class's imitation of them, as is evident in the turn-of-the-century tension between nobility and the rising middle classes in Europe. I argue, however, that the middlebrow aesthetic in fact *characterizes* the cultural mythology of "America," and is most evident in the very concept of the American Dream. There is no true ruling or "royal" class in the United States because it was founded on resistance to the English monarchy. Resistance to the ruling class is as foundational an "American" as the Constitution itself—and thus, although Guillory argues that the middlebrow is questionable in the U.S. context because we lack the ruling classes of Europe, I argue that this in fact makes the middlebrow uniquely suited to the American context. The foundational American project—the American Revolution and the Constitution—emancipated the bourgeoning nation from an official ruling class, but did not remove all desire to *imitate* that class. In fact, Americans' longstanding fascination with British culture, the royal family, royal weddings, and the goings-

on of Europe evidence the very essence of a middlebrow instinct—preoccupation with the royal family is in truth only further evidence of America's more deeply rooted fascination with wealth and privilege, which manifests itself consistently in national attachment to upward mobility stories, celebrities, and the many depictions of the American Dream. Although the concept of the middlebrow was identified and discussed in the 1920s, it truly hit its stride in the latter half of the century, when consumer culture became synonymous with American culture. I would argue that the middlebrow continues to dominate today in our reliance on modes of communication such as Twitter, which by nature condense information to the barest headlines, and entertainment platforms like TikTok, where users can watch thirty second videos for hours at a time, which are brief but whose legibility is wholly dependent on users' cultural literacy.

I argue that the middlebrow is simultaneously an ***ethic*, **an ***aesthetic,*** and an ***etiquette*** (or behavioral performance), whose status is retroactively conferred upon it. This explains how, for example, certain print editions of Shakespeare's plays can be considered middlebrow, and why entire institutions (like the ASEs and the Book-of-the-Month Club, which published a variety of genres) can be considered middlebrow. I argue that the particular middlebrow quality of a *thing*, or of literature, depends on its configuration as what John Searle (and Thorstein Veblen before him) term an "institutional fact." Institutional facts "are indeed facts," but, "unlike the existence of brute facts," institutional facts "presuppose the existence of certain human institutions" (Searle, 50, qtd in Schleifer 203). The middlebrow quality of a *thing* in many ways presupposes the existence of "highbrow" institutions, literatures, and values from which it must be distinguished. Merve Emre's *Paraliterary* (2017) suggests that at the turn of the century, various ideologies of reading brought range of readers to serious literary fiction, both "bad" reading (the *paraliterary,* which Emre identifies as *imitative*, *emotional*, *faddish*, and *information-seeking*)

and "proper" reading (using academically sanctioned approaches such as close reading)[7]. These paraliterary, "bad" readings are in fact recognizable modes of "middlebrow" reading, and were clearly defined by and in contrast to a High Cultural ethos, which valued an appreciation of literature as an aesthetic form over consumption. Emre explains that in the 1910s, Henry James was seen as the progenitor of "the properly literary novel," which, "through both its difficult aesthetic forms and its institutionalized practices of reception, like close reading, began to assert itself against the genres of mass culture" and thus, I argue, more clearly define the middlebrow (29). James' novels were also immensely popular with women readers, whose consumption of intellectually "difficult" literature in the context of women's colleges and ladies' clubs problematized this strict dichotomy between a high cultural ethos and a middlebrow ethic. As Emre notes, it was T.S. Eliot who titled such engagements with literature *paraliterary*. The institutions where James's novels and lectures were consumed can make the dissemination of such literature *middlebrow* by nature of the *method of consumption*. That is, the particular subject of a text is not as important for its identification as middlebrow as is the manner in which it is disseminated and consumed. In short, I argue that the middlebrow is inherently democratic in the sense that it makes an object or idea widely accessible to a middle-class (and even working class) consumer. The object or idea is considered middlebrow when the person consuming the object is perceived as middlebrow (imitative, insincere, or aspirational).

The American Dream is a dream of adaptation and adaptability, and the middlebrow aesthetic argues that the evolution involved can be *bought*—can be constructed out of an accumulation of objects, or images, or identities contrived through the purchase commodities—and thus the two, as I have defined them, are inextricably linked. For me, the middlebrow is a

[7] See especially p. 14, 29

broad term in that it uniquely characterizes the "American" cultural ethic—constant striving, pulling oneself up by the bootstraps by hard work or by deception. The middlebrow is also narrow in that it *is*, whether we like it or not, inextricably connected to consumerism and commercialism. This dissertation focuses on the crucial years before, during, and immediately following World War II, which I argue cemented middlebrow culture—and importantly for me, middlebrow literature—as an essential part of the American experience, and an indivisible, defining element of the American Dream.

Military Masculinity

As Aaron Belkin, Susan Jeffords, Prof. George Brown, Cynthia Enloe[8], and others have argued, military masculinity is a performance usually assumed by cisgender males, but women have also appropriated this masculinity to assert dominance or power, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. Military masculinity, as Belkin defines it, is particularly useful for my discussion here. For Belkin, "military masculinity has consisted of beliefs, practices, and attributes that often have enabled individuals to claim a great deal of authority, perhaps more than any other form of masculinity, on the basis of their relationships with military institutions and ideas… the relationship between masculinity, authority and military institutions and ideas has, more often than not, been privileged and even glorified during the past century" (Belkin 4). While war heroes have always been revered, the association of military institutions with inherent masculinity—and of military masculinity with inherent democratic values—began at the turn of the 20th century. After the Spanish-American War (1898), literature began representing military service as "paradigmatic of what it meant to be a real man" (Belkin 7). It was at this point that the model soldier became the ideal role model for the model citizen, obscuring the significant

[8] Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898-2001* (2012)

contributions of female soldiers[9] and reinforcing the idea of military *masculinity* as paramount to the American cultural imagination, particularly in terms of the relationship between the military and the type of American identity perpetuated by the particular version of the American Dream to which I refer in this dissertation (153).

Belkin argues that "Americans have been encouraged to understand military masculinity as an archetypal expression of democracy" (Belkin 6). The urgency of military masculinity during WWII was not simply a result of wartime need, but also of the psychological and emotional wounds of the Great Depression (1929 – 1939), which fundamentally threatened the role of the man as provider[10] for himself and his family. While the Great Depression destabilized the notion of the 'Self-Made Man,' the military apparatus of WWII purported to 'turn boys into men' and thus revitalize a weakened American masculinity. With this in mind, we can examine a fiction of American national identity (or ideal American identity) as necessarily masculine and dominating—thus, the individualism which is so closely tied to the American ideal is not only a desire to *avoid relying* on others (nations, neighbors, families, etcetera), but in fact to dominate them.

The American Dream

> The dream is a vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual, regardless of the position in society which he or she may occupy by the accident of birth. It has been a dream of a chance to rise in the economic scale, but quite as much, or more than that, of a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom. With this has gone the hope of bettering the physical conditions of living, of lessening the toil and anxieties of daily life.
>
> James Trunslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (1931)

Although the American Dream has existed in some form or another since the very inception of the United States as a nation of its own, I argue that it coheres into something

[9] See Anna Froula, "Free a man to fight: the figure of the female soldier in World War II popular culture," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 2.2 (2009). Froula's discussion of the figure of the female soldier will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 1.
[10] See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, p.6

specific and consistent, and something more akin to the myth that still floats around today, between WWII and the 1950s with the entitlements afforded to servicemembers and veterans by the post WWII GI bill. The American Dream is the imagined, rather than lived, experience in America as the "land of opportunity." Roger L. Pearson[11] notes in his article on *Gatsby* and the American Dream, that the dream itself took many different forms throughout American history:

> To Bradford and his fellow Puritans, the American dream was embodied in spiritual fulfillment; to Jefferson it was the flower of political fulfillment springing from the seed of the perfectability of man; de Crevecoeur and Franklin preached the gospel of the self-made man. Emerson saw the American dream as the opportunity to 'ask questions for which man was made.' And to Whitman it was 'the word Democratic, the word En Masse.' (Pearson 638)

Because of the inherent mutability of the term, it is necessary for me to define it as it will be used in the dissertation. At its least specific, the American Dream is the myth that any and every man can pursue his chosen goals and succeed—regardless of his origins. My use of the term "American Dream" refers to the pull-oneself-up-by-the-bootstraps mythology that an individual (masculine) can come up out of anonymity and make something (middleclass or higher) of himself. The Dream is only considered fulfilled to the extent that its achievement is visible to others, however. The evidence of achievement should be found in the Dreamer's material possessions, the trappings of middle-class life—these include but are not limited to: a nice house, a family, financial stability (symbolized by the nice house, which the Dreamer should ideally own), and at least whatever the Jones's have. I refer to the perhaps mundane but also widely shared, simplified, and modest core of the Dream—that hard work and close association with masculine institutions (military) can produce comfort and stability (economic, social, and relational). This particular version of the American Dream congealed in the 1950s, after the

[11] See Pearson, "*Gatsby*: False Prophet of the American Dream." *The English Journal* 59.5 (May 1970)

instability of the war thrust the U.S. into a state of conservative anxiety over self-preservation, a period which revealed the middlebrow core of the Dream itself.

Although, as mentioned, the American Dream seems to involve some of the same moving parts in each iteration, the particular and singular vision of the American Dream is in no way rigid. In fact, its very mutability is part and parcel of its appeal, and is the reason any figure, on any end of the political spectrum, can and has been able to employ the Dream to meet disparate goals. In his "original" articulation of the Dream, Adams described it as "a vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual, regardless of the position in society which he or she may occupy by the accident of birth. It has been a dream of a chance to rise in the economic scale, but quite as much, or more than that, of a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom. With this has gone the hope of bettering the physical conditions of living, of lessening the toil and anxieties of daily life" (Adams, *The Epic of America* qtd. Samuel 13). Although for Samuel, the American Dream is "the devout belief that tomorrow can and will be better than today," even he concedes that "home ownership has to be the theme that most clearly symbolized the American Dream over the decades" (6). Thus, the Dream, mythology, and rhetorical device repeatedly employed over the last century has to mean something much more tangible—and, conversely, much more mutable—than simply a hope for tomorrow. I argue that this "hope for a better tomorrow" encapsulated in the American Dream is fundamentally a consumerist Dream, and one that was encouraged, subsidized, and promoted by various government ages during and shortly after WWII.

I suggest that after WWII, the American Dream coheres into an aspiration not *only* to one's political (Jefferson), social (Franklin), academic (Emerson, Whitman) or economic goals, but a convergence of the three, with the social being the most central. I argue that in this period

the American Dream comes to be understood in more overtly middlebrow terms—it comes to involve marriage, the suburbs, and economic security, which sometimes comes in the form of work ("doing what one loves") rather than pure leisure. I argue that the post-WWII GI Bill education and housing benefits significantly impacted the establishment of the American Dream as we understand it today—that is, as a "dream" with a particular imagery attached to it. I also argue that the GI Bill and the Armed Services Editions work together to cohere this Dream; that is because what the Armed Services Editions as a body of texts imagine as possible, the GI Bill makes legally achievable—for a select group, that is.

One of the primary visible markers of the achievement of this Dream is the suburban single-family home. As Samuel notes, the suburban home came to symbolize the wealth of possibilities of 'the good life,' and as such, "the suburban home became central to the American Dream during the postwar years," something which was increasingly achievable thanks to "the Veterans Administration's home loan program, which had begun in 1944," which "led to a boom in new housing after the war, especially in the burgeoning suburbs" (56). In the postwar era, security (emblemized in part by the single-family home) became an essential feature of the American Dream, but that did not eclipse the inherent restlessness of the American Spirit. As Maureen Corrigan argues in *So We Read On*, the concept of *striving* is the most quintessential of "American" qualities, and thus true "leisure" can never be at the heart of the American Dream, even in a suburban utopia. More specifically, I argue that this Dream was solidified by WWII recreational projects such as the Armed Services Editions, middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club, post-WWII G.I. Bill housing and education benefits, and the social, civil, and academic changes also influenced by the G.I. Bill.

The threat and mystery of the American Dream is essential to understand because, despite its seeming closeness, it is unachievable precisely because it is a myth, it is illusory. This is evidenced in innumerable ways, but particularly in the time in which the Dream was supposedly achievable—the 1950s—when the college-educated suburban family was mobilized in advertising as the fulfillment of the American Dream. Each piece of legislation purporting to "restore" the American Dream refers at some point in its language to economic growth, homeownership, or higher education[12], and seems to gesture back towards this particular postwar period of economic prosperity. Yet, even in the postwar period, critics still griped about the difficulty of achieving the Dream, or the potential of young people to squander its legacy. The very security with which we associate the American Dream today is the same quality contemporaries criticized in opinion pieces. In a 1949 article in the *Washington Post*, Malvina Lindsay laments the "dull" young inheritors of the American Dream, who she claims lack the luster of their forefathers: "Th[e] dream in its original essence was that any mother's son might be President. Later it became more generally the idea that anybody—or rather everybody—could strike it rich. Now it's youth picturing itself as a $25,000-a-year lawyer, engineer, scientist, or business executive" (Malvina Lindsay, *Washington Post* 1949). "'Are we," she asks, "becoming a Nation of weaklings? What has become of the spirit of '49, of the Oklahoma Sooners, of the Alaska gold rushers? Why… are once aggressive, daring Americans following the drab, dull, regimented goal of security? … Moreover, where is youth that has the gabling spirit of its forbears to rush for free gold, homesteads, oil wells, timber, cattle lands?" (Lindsay, *Washington Post* 1949). Despite Lindsay's insistence on the rugged, aggressive American ideal, in actuality

[12] See discussion above. This sweeping statement refers to those pieces of legislation accessible through the Congress.gov online database, which range from 1977-2019. There are no available pieces of legislation which refer to the American Dream in their title before the year 1977.

American history demonstrates a much less individualistic picture. Over the centuries, we have been a nation of comparers, of consumers, and of competitors. Even in the 19th century, Tocqueville had observed with shock the materialism of Americans: 'The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives' (57, Tocqueville 1835). The very illusory nature of the American Dream means that our core values as a nation can be manipulated—and are manipulated—to fit consumer agendas.

The Great American Novel

The Great American Novel operates as an important supporting piece in my discussion because of the implicit connections between national-scope middlebrow book projects like the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Armed Services Editions and an "American" literature, which would contribute to an "American" cultural education. The debates over and quest for a definitive understanding of the "Great American Novel" operate in parallel ways to the workings of middlebrow culture, which sought to identify what one ought to read (or wear, buy, own, do, know, etcetera). By looking at the middlebrow and the Armed Services Editions in light of the quest to define and distribute a nation-unifying literature, I will show that the concept of a Great American Novel demonstrates both the middlebrow impulse to secure belonging via consumable objects *and* critics' attempts to safeguard an imperiled American intellectual community and threatened American masculinity by identifying a "great" standard within American literary production. The examples I select in Chapters One and Three of Great American Novels are Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, both of which were circulated as Armed Services Editions during WWII.

For my use of this term, I am indebted to Lawrence Buell's behemoth text, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. John W. DeForest, who first coined the term, claimed the Great American Novel would be "the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence… [the] task of painting the American soul within the framework of a novel" (Buell 28). This concern with the "ordinary emotions and manners" of Americans suggests that the Great American Novel is itself—categorically speaking, and without consideration of other factors such as a texts' accessibility of language—a middlebrow concept. Buell notes that "[c]alls for an autonomous national literature dated back to the Revolutionary era, but nothing like a consensus as to what might actually constitute a national fiction had congealed," initially because of the vast size of the country and its "provincialism" (Buell 25). After the Civil War, however, the idea of a cohesive and collective United States was both attractive and much-desired. This desire for cultural cohesion manifested itself in a renewed search for a unifying national literature. Buell notes that, "in the light of cultural politics… the dream of the GAN as first launched was at once the literary edge of what U.S. cultural historians have called the 'romance of reunion' between northern and southern whites, and part of a part of a broad multifront push toward pan-national consolidation that also included a stronger hand for the federal government… the creation of public university systems, the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the subjugation of Native Americans in the trans-Mississippi west, and the advent of standard time zones" (Buell 25).

The Great American Novel, like the American Dream itself, has been an enigma from the dawn of the nation; it first rose to prominence (and was first clearly articulated), however, in a moment of post-war anxiety for national identity. Like the Dream, this Novel is also perhaps most attractive *because* of its immateriality; each novel proclaimed to be *the* Great American

Novel is immediately contested and another set up in its place. The two texts I analyze in Chapter 3 demonstrate that what contemporary critics consider the Great American Novel is not always the one that will maintain such a distinction.

II. Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: An Ethic

"But that's a girl's book!" And Other Objections to "Middlebrow" Book Projects

Chapter one seeks to answer the question: What do two particular gendered, middlebrow book projects demonstrate about the construction of the concept of the American Dream during WWII? The Council on Books in Wartime Armed Service Editions project ultimately took as its goal a democratic distribution of books for the purpose of not only entertainment, but also of a particular kind of education in the particular imagery of American national identity. I argue in this chapter that the stated aims of the CBW (which I analyze in detail), as well as several key similarities between the ASEs and the contemporaneous Book-of-the-Month Club demonstrate the middlebrow nature of the book project. Although scholarly discussions of the ASE project have often referred to the Book-of-the-Month Club, references are more often than not in passing, and meant to highlight the gendered discomfort with recommended reading rather than a focused analysis on the similarities between the two. The Book-of-the-Month Club (BoMC) has been widely discussed in scholarship[13] as a hallmark of the middlebrow which is highly feminized.

I argue that examining the BoMC alongside the Council on Books in Wartime's Armed Services Editions (ASE) project provides a more complete picture of the middlebrow character of the American Dream. The middlebrow nature of the American Dream is intimately connected to the concept of *military masculinit*y, a particular conception of gender presentation and

[13] See Janice Radway and Susan Hegemen

formation which was perceived as essential to winning the War. Finally, I argue that *middlebrow literature* creates and perpetuates the idea of the American Dream, as evident in servicemembers' letters to Betty Smith about her novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I argue that by comparing the BoMC and ASE book distribution projects, as well as reading Betty Smith's articulation of the American Dream in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* alongside letters servicemembers wrote to Smith in response to her novel, we can see how foundationally the American Dream is rooted in the middlebrow, and how the "American" value of military masculinity both threatens and is dependent on this idea of the middlebrow.

Chapter 2: An Aesthetic

"All the Veteran Sons and Daughters of All the People"; Coming Home, Going to School, and "Imaging" the American Dream

Chapter two will explore the ways in which higher education and suburban home ownership come to be part and parcel of the middlebrow vision of the American Dream, as well as demonstrate the effect of a movement toward the middlebrow in academia itself as GIs return to the U.S. and with their use (or attempted use) of the GI bill influence the economic, academic, civil, and social stratification of American society. In this chapter, I discuss two post-WWII GI bill entitlements in particular—Education and Housing. While I do not have space to examine the other entitlements promised by the bill such as healthcare (a major entitlement), I focus on education and housing to demonstrate how these entitlements present the possibility of achieving a particular kind of middle-class lifestyle in the U.S., but one that is in truth only easily attainable by a select group (white men from a middleclass background). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 is widely recognized as the most expansive and comprehensive GI bill offered to returning veterans in U.S. history—one of the many reasons it is considered a turning point in

U.S. housing and education policy as well as civil rights. Similarly, the movement from the city to the suburbs, strongly influenced by the GI bill, helped create powerful visual imagery of the American Dream, subsequently used in advertising and immortalized in legislation decades later. Finally, the concurrent major shifts in the landscape of higher education demonstrate a shift towards—or in response to—a middlebrow aesthetic in both the home and the academy.

The middlebrow imbues itself even more fully in American culture after the war through opportunities made possible by the GI bill housing and education benefits available to all servicemembers who served at least ninety-six consecutive days. While for some, the GI bill made more affordable and more attainable a specific version of the American Dream, that opportunity was both promised and denied for others[14]. The "GI Bill of Rights" did not protect African Americans from the segregationist laws excluding them from select colleges and universities, or suburban neighborhoods like Levittown—even *if* they had managed to secure a mortgage despite what were often impossible odds at most banks and lending institutions. Similarly, women were unable to legally obtain a mortgage, loan, or charge account without a male relative cosigner until President Gerald Ford signed the Federal Consumer Credit Act of 1974—meaning women veterans were unable to act on their mortgage benefits—*thirty years* after the post-WWII GI bill promised "all" servicemembers these entitlements. This is not to say that *no* women or nonwhite veterans were able to take advantage of these entitlements, but that specific groups of veterans faced additional barriers to the promises of the bill; these barriers are not accidental. It is essential to understand the social and civil restrictions imposed on veterans in

[14] While this is indeed a sweeping statement, I refer here to a wealth of scholars in economics, cultural studies, history, and literature. Many have argued that the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 broadened and reinforced growing problems between different racial and economic groups in the United States, including wealth disparity, education attainment, and civil rights, simultaneously promoting and revealing the illusory nature of the American Dream

order to understand the GI bill's implementation and the lasting image of American life and the American Dream which that disparity consequentially produced.

Finally, this chapter will discuss the implications of suburban life on racialized and gendered cultural values in the U.S., which manifest in the *aesthetic* image of the suburban home. The middlebrow magazine not only "images" the suburban family and material realization of the American Dream, but also educated its readers on particular markers of belonging. Like each middlebrow institution discussed throughout the dissertation, debates surrounding the suburban landscape imply once more that the democratizing efforts of middlebrow culture are both alluring and challenging to the wider U.S. culture. The repeated inclusion of economic, domestic, and academic imagery in legislation including "American Dream" in the title[15] demonstrates the lasting legacy of this particular vision of the American Dream, and supports the stakes of my argument.

Chapter 3: An Etiquette

The Bookshelf of Middle(brow) America: How *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Makes Clear *Gatsby*'s American Dream

This chapter examines the foundations of middlebrow culture and literature in the U.S. in the 1920s with the ultimate goal of illustrating the lasting legacy of middlebrow aspiration on the concept of the American Dream. In conducting readings of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *The Great Gatsby*, I examine the ways in which the materialism and consumerism both encouraged and critiqued by these novels grounds the American Dream steadily in the unattainable. Bill Brown's discussion of the power and meaning of 'things' of literature, particularly the formal and mechanical strategies such as "rhetorical grammars" and "logic reference" employed by

[15] Refer to the introduction, where this legislation is discussed further. I refer here to the various "American Dream" Acts, from 1977 to 2021.

writers in order to make things "real" in literature (2003; 16-17) serves as a framework through which I analyze the double "thingness" of the middlebrow in these novels. Similarly, the two novels I examine in this chapter—F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*—grapple with the 'thingness' of American identity as well as the Americanness of 'things' by centering the protagonists' engagement with the material in the construction of their identities. Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* demonstrate the middlebrow American quality of *things*, both through the content of the novels and through the novels' histories as print objects.

I conclude the chapter with a reflection on the literary legacies of these two novels, and what we might gain from reading them in conversation with one another. This chapter thus traces the print histories of these two novels alongside analyses of their reception histories and critiques the concept of a "middlebrow" literature, turning again to contradictory definitions of both Modernism and the middlebrow to suggest, again, that the category of the middlebrow is more a mode of dismissal than a genuine attempt to generically categorize a form of literature. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the particular vision of the American Dream set by the Armed Services Editions project and the GI bill Education and Housing benefits idealize a version of America in which upward mobility is not only possible, but celebrated—and yet, as Chapter two makes glaringly clear, many veterans were barred from employing their GI benefits because of racist and sexist legislation and cultural practices. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* is able to serve both as a warning and as a promise of the constant allure of the American Dream.

CHAPTER 1: **An Ethic**
The Book-of-the-Month Club and the Armed Services Editions--
"But that's a girl's book!" (And Other Objections to "Middlebrow" Book Projects)

Introduction

A thorough examination of the roots of the American Dream necessitates a brief discussion of its assumed subjects. As I explain in the introduction to this dissertation, a clear definition of the middlebrow has been elusive in part because debates about it had centered for decades on whether it should be analyzed as a purely aesthetic category *or* as an economic product. Because (as feminist middlebrow scholars, and I, argue) the middlebrow must be understood as *both simultaneously*, my argument that the American Dream itself is an inherently middlebrow concept suggests that the values of the Dream are thus deeply rooted in the aesthetic values and economic structures which ground the middlebrow. The middlebrow nature of the American Dream is intimately connected to the concept of *military masculinity*[16], a particular conception of gender presentation and formation which was perceived as essential to winning the War. Although the military and masculinity have been closely linked in previous wars[17], the urgency of American military masculinity was in part a response to the emasculating effects of the Great Depression and was considerably heightened by the anxiety over American values as WWII ended and the Cold War loomed ahead. To understand the constructed nature of American identity (and, specifically, American military masculinity), I again draw on Judith Butler's idea of performativity, wherein she characterizes gender as an identity "instituted through a *stylized*

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[16] I borrow the term from Aaron Belkin, but the definition I explore is indebted also to Christina Jarvis's examination of American masculinity as situated in the physical male body of the WWII soldier (*The Body at War*), as well as Joshua Goldstein's multidisciplinary study of the intersection of war, sex, and violence (*War and Gender: How War Shapes Gender and Vice Versa*)

[17] See Belkin, "Introduction"

repetition of acts[18]". Both American identity and the American Dream involve and are dependent on fabrication, performance, and projection. Although the performance of national identity is more consciously constructed, like that of gender, it is an *imitation of that for which there is no original*, to borrow Butler's phrase[19]. Butler's theory of gender performance is notably distinct from the gendered performance of national identity I explore in the dissertation, but is useful as a model of how to approach the concepts of American identity and the American Dream as inherently performative and reliant on capitalist manipulation of cultural nostalgia—that is, both the American Dream and American identity seek to imitate and emulate a fictitious past. Similarly, *military masculinity* imagines an ideally masculine, democratic hero who will protect the nation physically (through service), morally (through sacrifice), and metaphorically (through standing in as the symbol of the nation's virility) despite the fact that there is no one historical person on which these characteristics are modeled. One might say that questions about the American Dream, American identity, the middlebrow, and the military masculine produce frustrating and unsatisfactory answers, if any at all. Yet, as I will demonstrate, discussing these concepts together brings us closer to an understanding of the American Dream—and thus, of the fiction of American identity—as innately middlebrow and intimately connected to the fiction of the inherent masculinity of the military, which in its democratizing and homogenizing education is itself a kind of middlebrow institution.

Finally, I argue that *middlebrow literature* creates and perpetuates the idea of the American Dream[20]. I argue that the middlebrow is incredibly dependent on and entangled with

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[18] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988)
[19] Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (2006)
[20] Again, my argument is indebted to Belkin, who argues that *juvenile literature* of the early 20th century creates and perpetuates the enduring idea of the military masculine, where before that time soldiers had been respected but not *revered* as the democratic American ideal. I use a similar framework throughout this chapter.

print culture, which both dictates and reflects how one ought to act, what one ought to buy, and what one ought to aspire to. In my use of the term "American Dream," I refer to mythology of the "bootstrap" work ethic: that hard work and intimate association with masculine institutions (such as the military) can yield comfort and stability (economic, social, and relational), thereby providing access to a securely middle-class or upper-middle-class lifestyle. This Dream was strengthened in American culture by the entitlements promised to veterans in the post-WWII G.I. Bill, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two. With the help of these military assistance programs, the American Dream comes to be understood in more overtly middlebrow terms—it comes to involve marriage, the suburbs, and economic security, as well as an anxious tension between the concepts of work ("doing what one loves") and leisure. The American Dream is a dream of striving and invention, and the middlebrow aesthetic posits that the evolution of 'self' (identity) which the quest involves can be *bought*—can be constructed out of an accumulation of objects, or images, or identities contrived through the purchase of books or expensive clothing—and thus the two, as I have defined them, are inextricably linked.

Perhaps the most notable middlebrow institution still influencing consumers in the 21st century is the Book-of-the-Month Club. The Book-of-the-Month Club (BoMC) has been widely discussed in scholarship[21] as a hallmark of the middlebrow which is highly feminized, despite the fact that many other book distribution projects, including the Armed Services Editions, utilized similar distribution techniques and advertising tactics. While I contend that the BoMC is useful in critiquing both the middlebrow and gendered reading, I argue that examining the BoMC alongside the Council on Books in Wartime's Armed Services Editions (ASE) project provides a more complete picture of the middlebrow character of the American Dream. Although

[21] See, for example, Janice Radway and Susan Hegemen

scholarly discussions of the ASEs have often referred the Book-of-the-Month Club, references are more often than not in passing, and meant to highlight the gendered discomfort with recommended reading rather than a focused analysis on the similarities between the two projects.

The Council on Books in Wartime Armed Service Editions project ultimately took as its goal a democratic distribution of books for the purpose of not only entertainment, but also of a particular kind of education. What inherent Americanness do these books promote which led to their selection as ASEs? What vision of the American Dream do these texts convey? How have their themes resonated with the American public differently over time? Why do we continue to read them? Most importantly, this chapter seeks to answer the question: What do these gendered, middlebrow book projects demonstrate about the construction of the concept of the American Dream during WWII, before it was solidified in the postwar era? In this chapter, I examine the World War II Council on Books in Wartime's Armed Services Editions and the Book-of-the-Month Club as highly gendered projects which destabilize the characterization of the middlebrow as highly feminine. I argue that by comparing the BoMC and ASE book distribution projects, as well as reading Smith's articulation of the American Dream in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* alongside servicemember letters in response to her novel, we can see how foundationally the American Dream is rooted in the middlebrow, and how the value of American military masculinity is both threatened by and dependent on this idea of the middlebrow.

I. The Beginning:

a. A Brief History of the Book-of-the-Month Club & Its Discontents

The Book-of-the-Month Club (BoMC) is widely considered to be the pinnacle of middlebrow culture today[22]. Founded in 1926, the roots of its project—or its ideal, to increase

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[22] It is worth noting that other book clubs have followed the BoMC pattern in the 20th and 21st centuries, including the very popular Reese Witherspoon and Oprah Winfrey book clubs. The BoMC is considered to have popularized

the general reading public—run much deeper in the history of U.S. intellectual culture. Only three years after its founding, articles such as Frederick A. Stokes's "The Case against the Book Clubs" (1929) began appearing in literary journals[23], decrying the "injury" such book clubs cause to "everyone interested in the welfare of authors, booksellers, publishers, and the reading public" (Stokes 47). Joan Shelley Rubin, the foremost scholar on the BoMC, notes that the image critics paint of it has long been "an agency for the destruction of independent judgement and literary standards" (Rubin 783). In fact, the originator of an American concept of culture, Rubin argues, is Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose concept of self-reliance "presumed a correspondence between exterior and inward virtue" encouraged by engagement with literature as well as nature (Rubin 784). Emerson encouraged the practice of wide reading, believing that any text could potentially contribute to the development of more sound qualities of mind. Thus, the great democratizer of books, as it has sometimes been called, runs for these critics directly against the grain of one of the oldest American ideals: self-reliance. But, as Emerson himself said, "To be great is to be misunderstood," and the critics and educators who sought to implement Emerson's vision leaned instead on Matthew Arnold's prescription to "the best which has been thought and said in the world' when suggesting works to readers," thus shifting the focus from culture to "useful knowledge" (Emerson, *On Self*-Reliance 8, Rubin 785). Rubin argues that the deep concern over what to read in a newly saturated book market actually begins in the late 19th century, when Americans were beginning to lose faith in the sanctity of the Emersonian "separate self" as an isolated individual and printing innovations, along with aggressive advertising, resulted in "a

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this book circulation technology—supporters of Witherspoon and Winfrey book clubs also often support the BoMC. See Cecilia Konchar Farr, "Faulkner Novels of Our OWN: Oprah's Middlebrow Book Club Meets the Classics" (2013), as an example between the continued characterization of such institutions as middlebrow. In addition to scholarship (see the prolific work of Joan Shelley Rubin, Mark K. Madigan) see Tom Perrin, *Rebuilding "Bildung": The Middlebrow Novel of Aesthetic Education in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States* (2011)

[23] Frederick A. Stokes. "The Case Against the Book Clubs," *The North American Review* 228.1 (1929). P. 47-56

threefold increase in American books in the years between 1880 and 1900" (Rubin 786). As Rubin argues:

> In a society in which opportunities were increasingly circumscribed by a person's ability to display the learning and credentials that would create a favorable impression, the best course might be not to build the capacity to meet any eventuality but to concentrate one's energies on acquiring immediately useful information. The site of much of the revaluation of culture and specialization was the university, where the introduction of the elective system in the 1870s and the heightened attention to research placed the advocates of broad humanistic study on the defensive, but the same shift toward organization by discipline or skill colored amateur and nonscholarly associations for the pursuit of information as well. (786)

Although it may be true to note the roots of this anxiety begin in the late 19th century[24], they reach their peak in the 20th. In 1909, the first of many middlebrow mail-order education projects begins with Charles W. Eliot's "Five Foot Shelf of Books," also known as the Harvard Classics. Eliot promised that in a meager "fifteen minutes a day" the "studious and reflective recipient" of the liberal education provided by these books would attain a "liberal frame of mind" (qtd. in Rubin 788). Eliot, a former Harvard professor and enterprising businessman, caused an uproar with the suggestion that the liberal education so far limited to those with access to institutions of higher learning could somehow be *purchased* by the masses—and not just *purchased*, but indeed *consumed* in as little as fifteen minutes a day.

By the 1920s, an anxiety over what to read becomes more than just a concern over culture; middle-class consumers' anxieties about reading are no longer just about *what* one should read, but *who* is reading it as well. Printing innovations in the 1920s allowed for an overwhelming surge in print media production, and this decade saw an ever-broadening reading

[24] As we can see, print production is influenced by a number of factors that could reasonably explain the phenomenon of military masculinity in first associated with this precise decade (1989-1900). After the Spanish-American War (1898), literature began representing military service as "paradigmatic of what it meant to be a real man" (Belkin 7).

public as correspondence courses, night schools, women's study clubs, lecture series, and elocution courses became increasingly popular. Public libraries expanded, and new institutions of reading appeared, "includ[ing] Great Books courses, extension programs offered by colleges and universities, journalism such as the *New York herald tribune*'s Books and the *Saturday review of literature*, outlines and 'packaged' books, radio programs featuring literary criticism, and, most notably, the Book of the Month Club" (Poole 466). More "average" citizens were attending college than in decades past, and the reading public appeared to expand at every social level. As the reading public expanded, so too did college enrollments, which increased more than doubled between 1920 and 1930. This increase suggested that, "if not necessarily an increase in the study of great books," at least some form of cultural consensus that "broad reading might intrinsically worthwhile and socially rewarding" (Rubin 788). With more readers, some critics begin to worry simultaneously about the *standardization* and *lack of specialization* evident in this new reading public—anxieties only heightened by the increased distribution methods. The dramatic increase in the availability and variety of books created an anxiety among the broadening middle class to know what exactly one ought to read to be considered respectably intelligent. Gordon Hutner catalogues the literary production and popular and critical receptions of the mid-twentieth century, and examines the institutions of canonization, which he implies evolves dramatically in this period. According to Hutner, the "opinion worth listening to" drastically shifted from the newspaper reviewer, to the magazine critic, to the scholar, and finally *away* from the scholar (but, it is worth asking, to whom?) throughout the 20th century. With the proliferation of reading materials and a broadened reading public come new kinds of critics, and the "truth" became increasingly difficult to locate. What is worth reading and what is popular began to drift closer in association.

In 1926, New York advertising man Harry Scherman created the Book-of-the-Month Club, hoping to take advantage of the hunger for literature he felt bookstores were not satisfying. With the help of his advertising background, he settled on a mail-order subscription of books to both meet the desire for literature and also ensure repeat business and thereby a profit. Rubin notes that "Under the terms of the club's initial contract, subscribers agreed to buy one new book per month for a year, at full retail price plus postage, with no book costing more than three dollars. For their money they also received the guidance of the Selecting committee, the Board of Judges," who would ensure they were reading only the best (782). The image of the BoMC as "an agency for the destruction of independent judgement and literary standards" (to borrow Rubin's words again) appeared almost at its inception in 1926, in great part because of this Board of Judges, made up of some of America's best authors and critics: Henry Seidel Canby, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Christopher Morley, Heywood Broun, and William Allen White (783). The BoMC was preceded by Charles W. Eliot's "Five Foot Shelf of Books," Also known as the Harvard Classics. This project was similarly reviled by critics who felt that his promise to "furnish a liberal education to anyone willing to devote fifteen minutes per day to reading them" subverted traditional associations of academic reading with sustained effort and thus cheapened the enterprise (Hawkins 165). Critics of both the Harvard Classics and the BoMC feared that the so-called expert(s) in charge of selecting assumedly great books for the masses promoted standardization and the deterioration of both culture and taste. Rubin argues that these anxieties reflect the "intensification of what were, at bottom, fears about the fate of the individual that had been building since at least the 1880s" (788). I would add that fears about the fate of the individual become increasingly entangled with anxieties about gender over the following twenty years. About two decades after the BoMC raised eyebrows and ruffled feathers, the escalation of

World War II brought with it a dramatic change in American culture and attitudes, and an increased anxiety about the feminization of American culture and American men. This was due, in part, to the expanding middle class. Poole notes that "[w]here for American middle-class males the nineteenth century pivoted around self-making, the twentieth century proved a period of self-realization" as a result of increasing cultural values that "stressed leisure, spending, and individual fulfillment" (464). As in the 1920s, these changing cultural norms were accompanied by an extensive increase in the availability and variety of books. For servicemen and women overseas during WWII, this was even more true, thanks to the Council on Books in Wartime Armed Services Editions (ASE) project, which sought to boost morale and provide (acceptable) recreational opportunities in the form of 122 million copies of 1,322 titles.

b. Inclusion vs Exclusion: The Soldier Voting Law of 1944

Although certainly not the first attempt at mass paperback publishing, the Council on Books in Wartime facilitated an immense surge in paperback book production through ASEs. What initially began as a good idea from an Army officer became with the establishment of the Council on Books in Wartime, "an efficient co-operative enterprise which involved the army, the navy, the War Production Board, over seventy publishing firms, and more than a dozen printing houses, composition firms, and paper suppliers" (Cole 3). The Council and the Office of War Information (OWI) sponsored not only the ASEs, but also what were known as Overseas Editions (OE) and the much smaller-scale Transatlantic Editions (TE), which were conceptualized as a propaganda and reeducation tool for countries newly liberated from Axis occupation and considered equally significant to the construction of an "American identity" at home and abroad. Although selections sometimes overlapped, the missions of the Armed Services Editions, Overseas Editions, and Transatlantic Editions were distinct. The Council's

primary aim was "to encourage the reading of as many books useful to morale, public understanding of both military affairs and the problems of peace to come, and the books which will help the reader prepare himself for war work or service in the armed forces" (14). But what exactly were these books? What texts would help with both "military affairs" and "problems of peace," and which would help the reader prepare himself for service to the war effort?[25]

While the Armed Services Editions were first and foremost a form of recreation, the purposes of the OEs and TEs were designed to curate a particular image of the United States for consumption by its Allies (and its enemies) through the distribution of American literature. These texts were intended to improve foreign perception of the United States, whose public image had suffered greatly by a combination of Axis propaganda and poor international public relations. While the 4.1 million copies of the OE and TE projects are dwarfed by the ASE's 122 million, the mission of the former was not to provide recreation to the masses of soldiers and sailors, but rather to re-educate the elite of supposedly brainwashed countries. The Overseas Editions were intended to change opinions about Americans from the inside out—meaning, the most sympathetic texts had to be selected, and they needed to appear in the readers' own language.[26] A smaller project, the Transatlantic Editions, had a similar mission (but appeared in

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[25] It is important to note that, as print culture scholars have noted with a frustration similar to my own, the Council on Books in Wartime archival materials fail to demonstrate the Council's selection process in almost all cases. John B. Hench notes this in his book, *Books As Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets in the Era of WWII*, one of the more comprehensive histories of the ASEs: "Still, the archives are not as complete in documenting the decisions made as one might like. A list that survives from a meeting on July 5, 1944, noted that four titles—Hamilton Basso's *Mainstream*, Constance Rourke's *American Humor*, Robert Trumbull's *The Raft*, and George R. Stewart's *Storm*—had been 'queried' by the council's Advisory Committee. *Mainstream* and *Raft* eventually made it into the series, but the other two… did not. Why did CBW's committee raise special questions about these four books, and how were those questions resolved?" (100-1)

[26] See Hench "During 1944-5, seventy-two editions of forty-one titles were published in the Overseas Editions series… A total of 3,636,074 copies were shipped. OEs ultimately appeared in four languages. Listed in the order in which the decisions to publish in those languages were made, they are French, Italian, English, and German" (94).

different languages).[27] These missions were possible at all because the United States could offer what these countries sorely lacked during the War—paper and printing houses. The U.S. provided both the printed texts and in some cases the paper to local publishing houses in occupied countries, with the caveat being that they had to prominently display OE and TE texts. These projects hoped to combat stereotypes of "Americans as being, among other things, 'without culture or taste'; 'barbarian destroyers of ancient civilizations'; 'boastful, rash and superficial'; prone to 'terrorism and gangsterism'; and possessors of 'far-reaching imperialistic designs'" (Hench, *Books as Weapons* 96). The Council on Books in Wartime felt this was a necessary effort, as "Even after V-E Day, Wallace Carroll, a senior OWI official, declared that 'there is not a European today who has not been influenced' over the previous five years by the Nazi propaganda message that 'the United States is a reactionary, capitalist nation dominated by Wall Street and fighting this war for profit in dollars and territory'" (96).

Although the goal was to challenge these stereotypes and increase public sympathy with America and the American Dream, the leadership resisted commissioning propaganda directly and opted instead for what they felt would present a truer (or more flattering) picture of the U.S. They argued that "the best way to avoid overt propaganda was simply to publish 'the best American literature,'" but, as with the ASEs, the rigorous selection process led to a compromise of initial taste in favor of texts that both met propaganda objectives and were least likely to offend their intended audience (100). Some of the books that were sent over (Overseas Eds) included "Bernard Jaffe's *Men of Science in America* [which] showed Americans were more than capable of doing pure science (held in high esteem in Europe), and were not merely crafty

[27] "TEs appeared in another twenty editions, in two languages, of sixteen different titles… The press runs of these French-and-Dutch-language Transatlantic Editions totaled approximately five hundred thousand copies, making the total number of copies in both series about 4.1 million" (95).

inventors" (*Humanities*). Similarly, "Sherrod's *Tarawa* was one of several books on the war in Asia and the Pacific, aimed at enlisting the active participation of recently liberated nations like France and the Netherlands in defeating Japan (and regaining their overrun colonies in Indo-China and Indonesia)" (*Humanities*). The books that were rejected from this project were usually "Edgier books of social criticism, like the novels of Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis" (*Humanities*); but other books[28] "failed to make the cut because the series, which was aimed at elite opinion makers, deliberately excluded books for children" or books not considered intellectually challenging (*Books as Weapons* 101). Thus, the texts selected were less often "entertaining" novels and more often books displaying America's hidden prowess in seemingly European endeavors like politics and pure science. The books that were rejected from this project were books which could be read as critical of the U.S., like "the novels of Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, [which] were, however, published in Europe, with the government's approval and assistance, once the book publishing industries in the liberated countries were back in business" (Hench). The Overseas Editions are important to consider for several reasons, not the least of which is the contrast it provides to the ASEs, though organized through collaboration between the same two departments. While the Overseas Editions were constructed for a particular imagined European elite with the intention of re-educating the already well educated, the Armed Services Editions were essentially designed to serve a broader, less homogenous—and less imagined—group assumed to be, delicately put, less avid readers. It is helpful to look at the ASE's sister projects in order to understand just how fully the ASEs were conceptualized as both a source of recreation and one of education. The way in which the Council on Books in Wartime approached selection for ASEs was different than for

[28] Such as Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka* and Marjorie Kinnan Rawling's *The Yearling*, both of which were subsequently published as ASEs

OE and TEs, if only because the books were to serve different purposes. While the OE and TEs were intended for an elite, educated audience, the ASEs were designed to cater to what the selectors presumed was the diverse (and possibly even functionally illiterate[29]) masses of servicemembers.

At a 1942 roundtable on the topic of "Books as Weapons in the War of Ideas," jointly hosted by the Council on Books in Wartime and The *New York Times*, panel members discussed what kinds of books are useful in times of war, and for whom. Although many panelists promoted books of military technique and strategy, a few brought up the idea of cheap paperback fiction. When specific fiction titles were brought up, chairman Fadiman "wondered whether morale in the Army itself… is something that can actually be created by means of books, even partially" (Fadiman, qtd Roundtable 37). When Fadiman asked his peers, "I mean, does the regular soldier actually feel a stiffening of feeling when he reads a book such as the ones we have been discussing[30]?", Colonel Greene, a graduate of West Point and himself an author, stressed to him the importance of literature of all kinds for the purpose of boosting morale: "I know many books… were read by soldiers in the World War. In this war you have an army nearly 50 per cent high school graduates, or better. Therefore, there are far many more books read [in this War]" (38). The Council was primarily interested in supporting servicemembers' morale through the distribution of books. The Council on Books in Wartime ASE project was not the first to attempt to ship large quantities of reading material to servicemen overseas, but it was the most successful. The ASE project was notably larger in scale than either the OE or TE

[29] Poole, Roundtable (page numbers needed)

[30] The books discussed at this point in the Roundtable included Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* –neither of which, interestingly enough, were actually selected for ASE publication. Hemingway's one ASE was *To Have and Have Not* (1937), and several of Crane's short stories were published as a collection.

projects, and thus proved incredibly more inclusive in text selections. It is notable that several of the texts rejected for OE or TE inclusion were published as ASEs—this suggests not only a more inclusive set of selection criteria, but also implies different presumptions of American identity at home versus abroad. The rejection of books for OE and TE deemed less intellectually challenging, compared with the variety of genres, intellectual challenge, and subject matter included in ASEs makes clear that what the OWI considered "American" in a foreign context, for a foreign audience, differed from what was considered "American" enough for the boys serving the country. Texts rejected from OE and TE selection but included in the ASEs demonstrate both the malleability of the American Dream and the mimetic nature of American identity.

Although they were recreational, ASEs were heavily regulated and were screened by almost one hundred readers[31] before they could become approved. This was due in part to the Council's conviction that the ASEs would have a significant impact on the war effort. As the Council began conceptualizing the Armed Services Editions, they concluded that its purpose was not to select texts which might inspire a desire to *fight*, but rather "the book that does not idealize war, but makes you feel that some things are worth fighting for and makes you wish you had been there[32]" (35). Though one's first inclination may be to think of the books *excluded* by the Council in selecting ASEs, the selection process seems to have been primarily one of inclusion. The Council states in a draft of their aims that the purpose of these books is in part to "sustain morale through relaxation and inspiration," and to "clarify our war aims and the problems of the peace" ("Aims," 3). Thus, the Council claimed to work towards furthering the war effort

[31] Although sources (scholarly and archival) are vague on this point, the volunteer readers appear to have been active members of the print culture community: authors, editors, publishers, and booksellers.
[32] It is unclear whether Col. Greene had meant the battlefield or the homefront in his use of the pronoun "there," but I infer based on his other statements that he is referring to the U.S. in peacetime.

overseas *and* at home, by connecting servicemembers to the kinds of recreation promoted at home. Because of this interest in variety, the selection of Armed Services Editions texts was a largely positive one. By positive, I again mean inclusive rather than exclusionary. The positive nature of the selection process did not detract from the committee's rigor, however. Texts selected for inclusion in the ASE project were required to meet several criteria[33] and to fulfill the aims of the Council* . The Council noted in their founding documents that "books are useful, necessary, and indispensable" in three primary ways:

1. In influencing the thinking of the American people with regard to the major problems of the United Nations in connection with the war and the peace, and in clarifying our own weaknesses and improving the people's understanding of our enemies as well as our friends
2. In the maintenance of morale,
3. In supplying information that will be of use to the individual in connection with his particular part in the war effort. ("Aims" 11)

The "Aims" thus suggest that the texts selected must promote some inherent "Americanness" if "one of its major aims should be to secure the widest possible reading of an occasional book belonging in the first of these three classifications" (12). The key word here, however, is *occasional*. The actual selection of texts seems to be more representative of a broad range of taste than particular democratic, imperialistic values. In fact, while books on war, world politics, and military strategy were promoted both overseas as well as at home, like readers on the homefront, servicemembers seemed to be more interested in fiction than in analyses of the war in which they were active participants. Thus, the second "Aim" listed seems to be the one most often met: the maintenance of morale. The wide range of recreational reading material available to servicemembers in this particular war was due to more than the Council on Books in Wartime alone. World War I was the first in which a library service was provided to servicemembers in a

[33] Refer to archival materials, accessible July 2021

consistent and organized way[34]; the Library Section[35], founded between the Wars and intended to coordinate the placement, organization, and stocking of libraries in military bases, camps, and overseas, expanded its services during WWII. Together, the Council on Books in Wartime and the Library Section made reading material available to servicemembers (free of charge) and encouraged reading as an acceptable (masculine) form of recreation that was not only entertaining but also improved one's understanding of the world around them.

As a result of the ASEs, men who had never before sought much more reading than the evening newspaper turned to short stories, novels, and even classics. Many scholars suggest that this is due to the combination of boredom and a lack of recreational options—especially for those stationed where they may suffer through a language barrier with the locals[36]. John Jamieson, a member of the Office of War Information (OWI[37]) during the War and Chief of the Library Section, notes that astonishing numbers of young servicemen overseas became what he calls "omnivorous readers" during the war—in spite of some Council members' initial assumption that many servicemembers were functionally illiterate—and speculated that these men increasingly turned to reading because books were "brought to them free of charge" (Jamieson 332). Once listless readers came to have voracious literary appetites during the war, and the kinds of reading these readers requested also influenced the Council's selections. Like the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Council on Books in Wartime published an incredible variety of books as ASEs. In fact, Jamieson's analysis of the first 774 titles in the ASE collection demonstrate that what might be considered "recreational" fiction—namely, those categorized

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[34] See Arthur Young, *Books for Sammies: The American Library Association and WWI* (1981); Theodore Koch, *War Libraries and Allied Studies* (1918)/ *Books in War: The Romance of Library War Service* ; James Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste*(1961)

[35] The Library Section refers to the Library Section of the Office of War Information (Department of Defense); the Library Section is connected to the War Department Library, now housed in the Pentagon.

[36] Corrigan, Cole, etc.

[37] The Office of War Information, founded during WWI, became the Department of Defense in 1949

generically as Contemporary Fiction, Humor, Historical novels, and Westerns—was distributed in the highest numbers. Although genre played a role in texts' popularity, Jamieson's survey suggested that topic, more than genre, may have been more influential in determining a text's selection. Servicemembers' "principal favorites," he noted, are those that "deal frankly with sexual relations… [and] action stories of all types, but particularly western novels" (Jamieson 331). Interest in books about sex, action, and westerns were demonstrably the most popular "regardless of tone, literary merit and point of view, no matter whether the book is serious or humorous, romantically exciting or drably pedestrian" (Jamieson 331). While "whether the same men actually read and enjoy both Donald Henderson Clarke and Hemingway… both *Bishop's Jaegers* and *The Grapes of Wrath*" is certainly a topic for debate, what is most evident in Jamieson's study is the fact that "many soldiers with little else to do in their leisure time bec[ame] omnivorous readers, with an extraordinary capacity for reading almost any type of novel with great enjoyment" (Jamieson 331). Whatever a particular servicemember's genre or difficulty of choice, then, it was available to him in the immediate or by request.[38]

One notable exception to the general rule of positive or inclusive selection, and one which necessarily warrants critical examination, was the period from 1944-1945 during which the Soldier Voting Law mandated censorship of texts which promoted "political bias." Jamieson's "Censorship and the Soldier" (1944) explores the impact of the Soldier Voting Law on text selection and distribution. Jamieson stresses the impact of the Soldier Voting Law, and of Title V in particular, because of its impact on the reading habits of servicemembers overseas. Interestingly, little has been written about this censorship or about the particular texts and selection processes aside from Jamieson's contemporary account. As a former Chief of the

[38] I continue my discussion of the book-request process over the following three pages of this section.

Library Section and a current member of the OWI during the war, Jamieson had particularly acute insight and first-hand knowledge about this subject matter. Jamieson, a prior member of the Library Section and the OWI, wrote a volumes-long text on the Soldier Voting Law and library activity during the war, as well as on the Armed Services Editions project more broadly. Though his texts are significantly dated, historians and cultural scholars have largely neglected the Armed Services Editions project and its surrounding context—thus, he is both a primary and essential source for understanding the impact of politics on reading in the war. Here, his article "Censorship and the Soldier" provides not only useful historical context but also serves as a primary source against which we can study ASE selections. Jamieson is one of the few who have written about the Soldier Voting Law as it connects to the ASEs, and the only to break down ASEs by genre and popularity. There are, generally speaking, two modes of textual selection for enterprises like BoMC and ASE: inclusion (positive; must-read) and exclusion (negative; censorship). While it's difficult to know exactly why certain texts were selected or passed over in general because much of the committee's deliberation over specific books is *not* in their meeting minutes[39], it is helpful to look at two specific cases: the year of censorship provided by Title V of the Soldier Voting Law and the scramble to keep up with the demand for Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. In 1943, Title V facilitates the moment in which the Council on Books in Wartime becomes unable to conduct their selection process as usual. That same year, Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is published, and the scramble to read it begins.

First, it is essential to understand what exactly the Soldier Voting Law was designed to do, and how Title V threatened servicemember rights. The premise of the law was that there

[39] NOTE: Deliberation over specific texts and the particular criteria for text selection are not present in the meeting minutes *available digitally*. Of the meeting minutes I was able to view in the archive, none contained notes on specific texts with regard to selection criteria.

needed to be some way in which soldiers could vote while deployed overseas. The Constitution is written such that control of Federal and state elections is under state purview—because each state has its own election procedures, it was difficult to ensure that soldiers could vote during election time, although it was their right as citizens. In June 1943, Senators Theodore F. Greene of Rhode Island and Scott W. Lucas of Illinois introduced a bill they thought would solve the problem by providing a short form ballot to all servicemen which would be accepted as valid by all fifty states—the Greene-Lucas Bill (Jamieson, "Censorship" 370). Like many voting issues, however, this was strongly influenced by partisan bias, and became more a power struggle between President Roosevelt and Senator Taft than an earnest attempt to provide servicemembers overseas with the opportunity to vote. Senator Taft and Representative John E Rankin were opposed to unrestricted use of the short-form ballot by service men as an infringement of states' rights, claiming that because the short-form ballot could be distributed much more easily than other forms of ballots, this would ensure a larger service men's vote, which Taft was sure would be for the sitting Commander-in-Chief (370). In short, Taft admitted that he feared that if servicemembers were able to vote in large numbers, he would lose the election[40]. In fact, Taft was convinced that the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy were already working to re-elect President Roosevelt to a fourth term out of a desire to maintain their own positions. Although he could in public opinion reasonably disagree with aspects of the proposed bill, Taft could not publicly oppose it in its entirety because of popular sentiment toward deployed soldiers' needs. WWII deployed the most drafted men of any war, and thus virtually every American citizen was touched by the plight of the soldier in some way and was sympathetic to his needs. The culmination of his anxieties about Roosevelt's maintenance of

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[40] Sound familiar?? Acknowledge this parallel, or no?

power thus prompted Taft and Rankin to draft severe changes to the Green-Lucas Bill—The Soldier Voting Law, which would "protect" soldiers' voting rights by banning the distribution of materials which could be said to influence their opinion on the election in any way (371). The Soldier Voting Law went into effect on April 1, 1944. Although roughly thirty per cent of all eligible voters in the services" voted in the general election of 1944 (374), the consequences on book distribution were incredible and perhaps unexpected.

The consequences of The Soldier Voting Law included extreme and uneven restriction of books on military bases abroad (367-8). Trautman was deeply disturbed by the restrictions imposed by the Soldier Voting Law, and dedicated himself to ensuring that it was carried out to the letter in the hopes of demonstrating its inefficacy. The Library Section of the War Department was authorized to oversee a distribution of books, but only after they had been approved by the Council on Books in Wartime "in accordance with a list of criteria of which the most important was the exclusion of 'political argument or political propaganda of any kind designed or calculated,' etc." (375). It is imperative to note that while commanders were allowed to supplement ASEs, "purchases of American books had to be made through the Library Section, which was authorized to reject any order 'not conforming to the above policy.'" (375). Thus, almost all texts had to be approved by the Council on Books in Wartime—or, at least, they had to meet CBW selection criteria—and the CBW was, itself, being restricted by Title V and the OWI. Because "[s]imilar restrictions were placed on the purchase of books by the Education and Orientation Branches of the Information and Education Division," it is clear that servicemembers were being, in essence, censored (375).

The treatment of magazines and books by executers of Title V demonstrate the significant and damaging consequences of the law, as well as the marked contrast to book-

distribution projects like the ASEs. The Library Section first prepared a list of soldier preference magazines, most likely because they are both cheaper and quicker to produce, and were known to have a wide readership[41]. There were then sixteen magazines not legally established as soldier preference magazines, but which servicemembers could obtain by request. Each issue of non-preference magazines had to be reviewed before it was sent out, but Jamieson notes that despite this, only one issue of one magazine was officially rejected[42]. Unlike magazines, soldier preference did not affect books under Title V, meaning that while a servicemember could request magazines not officially listed as soldier preference magazines, the same lenience did not apply to books. Books not sanctioned under Title V could not be purchased overseas. Thus, we know which magazines were and were not allowed under Title V and why—whereas book selection and exclusion was more nuanced. The extreme restriction on books put a strain on servicemember and civilians' attitude toward the government, which was treating soldiers like children. Col. Trautman, the Library Section Chief mentioned earlier, believed it his duty during the first three months of executing the Soldier Voting Law to "point out the absurdities and inconsistencies of the law on all occasions and to request the Coordinator of Soldier Voting to authorize liberal interpretations wherever there was a choice… He continued to follow the absurd directives (when a congressman suggested that the *Congressional Record* be distributed to all Army libraries, Trautman informed him that the publication contained 'political argument' calculated to influence votes) and hoped for the best" (380). His most acute attention was on Title V of the law, the provision concerning the specifics of "prohibited" materials. The last book

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[41] The magazines on the unit set list were: *Life, Reader's Digest, Esquire, Time, Newsweek, Saturday Evening Post, New Yorker, Cosmopolitan, Omnibook,* and *Coronet.* The remaining eight were popular publications not included because of their physical weight: *Pic, Collier's, American, Look, Liberty, Click, Redbook,* and *National Geographic*.

[42] The only censored magazine was the "June 1944 issue of *Country Gentleman*, which contained an article on national agricultural policy by Clifford R. Hope, a Republican Congressman from Kansas" (Jamieson 376).

banned from distribution was, ironically, *AAF: The Official Guide to the Army Air Forces* because it contained a full-page portrait of President Roosevelt (380). The Book-of-the-Month club identified what selection members thought was a loophole in the law—though the *government* could not send servicemembers "unapproved" material, perhaps that material could be *gifted*. The generous donations by the BOMC[43] did not go unnoticed, and it became increasingly difficult to uphold the restrictions imposed by the Soldier Voting Law. The screening process for these books was incredibly judicious. Under the Soldier Voting Law, books were being rejected in large numbers, and civilian opinion of the law was plummeting. Jamieson argues that "even the most innocuous westerns will sometimes contain allusions to Mormonism, free silver, or some other partisan issue dead to all mankind except the 78th Congress as interpreted by the War Department" (379). And, considering westerns were some of the most popular ASEs according to Jamieson's poll, this restriction posed a significant challenge to text selection.

Finally, on June 18th, 1945, the Council on Books in Wartime voted in its general monthly meeting to protest the Soldier Voting Law publicly. The CBW stated that it felt "their function was to select books *for* soldiers, not keep books *from* them" (381, emphasis original). This sentiment seems fair enough, considering the CBW was made up of mostly publishers and "bookmen", but one should keep in mind that the CBW and the Book-of-the-Month Club (BoMC) also had chairpersons in common. When their efforts to circumnavigate the law by

[43] "The Book-of-the-Month Club was then donating some 1500 subscriptions to Army libraries throughout the world… Obviously, 1500 monthly packages, frequently containing two volumes each, constituted a substantial number of books, and therefore it seemed evident that the acceptance by the Army of any Book-of-the-Month Club selection containing the prohibited political matter would be a violation of the law [which stated that] It was legal to accept a single copy… and circulate it to all readers; but it was illegal to accept a 'substantial number' of copies of the book if the responsible officer thought that it contained political matter of the prohibited type" (378)

donating 1500 BoMC subscriptions each month had failed, it became clear that the law would have a lasting and harmful effect on armed services morale programs and thus on the lives of servicemembers. Title V of the law *was* revised, and the revision provided that "the Army and Navy might buy anything except one-shot electioneering pamphlets; the overseas magazine set might include only soldier preference magazines (of which there were then 212); and anything the Advisory Committee approved might be reprinted as a Council Book" (383). Thus, of the Soldier Voting Law the provisions that made voting accessible to servicemen overseas remained, while the censorship in Title V of the Law was minimized. While this might seem like extensive context for an analysis of the impact of middlebrow book distribution projects on our conception of the American Dream, it is essential to note that the one example of exclusionary text selection for the Armed Services Editions was not a result of the *Council's* independent selection process, but rather was imposed on the CBW by a small but significant part of a bill—Title V—which was motivated entirely by partisan interest. The cascading effect this bill had on servicemember recreation and education further demonstrates the closeness of American politics and American reading habits—Senator Taft was so concerned he would lose the upcoming election that the provision he proposed included censorship that extended beyond overtly political material and into novels and even military manuals. The Soldier Voting Law enabled servicemembers overseas to vote in vastly larger numbers than in previous wars, and the revision of Title V allowed for the Council to fulfill its aims in providing books for the recreation and morale of those servicemembers.

The brief months of Title V of the Soldier Voting Law represent the only significant example of exclusionary text selection, but although it is true that the selection process was primarily inclusive, not all texts served the three primary aims of the Council. What seems to

have mattered most to ASE selectors was *not* the level of difficulty or sophistication (as was the case in the OE and TE projects), but the American-ness of the text. Several of the ASE texts are decidedly un-American in the sense of promoting the United States and its culture in the way Overseas Editions or Transatlantic Editions sought to, so the American-ness I refer to here is reduced to its proxy in wartime and international politics—*masculinity* and dominance. Alex H. Poole notes that ASE selectors had several main objectives, including to provide "informative books that embodied 'accuracy, clear presentation, and modernity' (the hallmarks of virile masculine culture), to provide fiction of 'enduring value' and fiction of ephemeral interest, and to supply supplementary reading for soldiers' education. Most important, selectors sought books that adopted a '*masculine viewpoint*' suitable for men between the ages of twenty and twenty-two" (Poole 469). What exactly this masculine viewpoint might be, however, becomes increasingly difficult to clearly identify as the war progresses and Armed Services Editions selections increasingly overlap with Book-of-the-Month Club Selections. This overlap seems reasonable when one considers the number of chairmen in common between the Council and the BoMC committee[44], but the disappearing boundary between men and women's reading materials caused gender-based anxieties in those observing on the home front. As noted previously, it seems that the Council prioritized its aim of boosting morale and providing recreation over providing texts which truly challenged the thinking of Americans. Cultural anxieties on the home front mounted as civilian men considered the possible feminization of men participating in, as we have discussed, an institution which is considered hyper-masculine—the focal point of masculinity and the site where boys become men. David H. Morgan argues that "Of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and deployed, those associations with war and

[44] Shared members: X; Pocket Books' Philip Van Doren Stern later directed the ASE project

the military are some of the most direct," noting that everything about the appearance of the solider supports this fiction: "The stance, the facial expressions, and the weapons clearly connote aggression, courage, a capacity for violence, and sometimes, a willingness for sacrifice. The uniform absorbs individualities into a generalized and timeless masculinity while also connoting a control of emotion and a subordination to a larger rationality" (165-166). Here, masculinity both embodies and challenges what are considered essential American values: individualism, independence, liberty, domination. If the very foundation of American military masculinity is threatened, what is there to prevent the feminization of the entire nation?

While war heroes, cowboys, and other symbols of national, overtly masculine dominance have been memorialized in other moments throughout U.S. history, the association of military institutions with inherent masculinity—and of military masculinity with inherent democratic values—began at the turn of the 20th century. The military is, especially during WWII, perceived as a masculine institution which converts boys into men. The term *military masculinity* is one whose definition I borrow from Aaron Belkin, who argues that "[M]ilitary masculinity has consisted of beliefs, practices, and attributes that often have enabled individuals to claim a great deal of authority, perhaps more than any other form of masculinity, on the basis of their relationships with military institutions and ideas," noting that "the relationship between masculinity, authority and military institutions and ideas has, more often than not, been privileged and even glorified during the past century" (Belkin 4). As Belkin, David H. Morland, Cynthia Enloe[45], and others have argued, military masculinity is a performance usually enacted

[45] Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898-2001* (2012); Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II* (2004). Suzanne Jeffords X; George Brown X; Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You: The Militarization of Women's Lives* (2003); David H. Morgan "Theater of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities." In *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (1994); Donald J. Mrozek. "The Habit of Victory: The American Military and the Cult of Manliness." In *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and*

by cisgender men, although women have also appropriated this masculinity to assert dominance or power. In a time where more women were needed in the workforce to substitute for the servicemen overseas, previous expectations of "traditional" middle-class gender norms were challenged. Thus, while the ASE enterprise was both unprecedented and incredibly influential, many were concerned about the increased consumption of middlebrow material facilitated by them, in part because of concerns that ASE selections blurred the line between male and female reading materials, because of the supposed threat the middlebrow posed to American masculinity.

Thus, while the ASE project enjoyed a fairly positive reputation overall, it also provided fodder for critics wary of the increasingly mixed-gender nature of the American reading public. The increasingly—or, what was *perceived* as increasingly—similar literary tastes of men and women created tension for critics of the middlebrow, who believed that it dangerously challenged long-standing American gender roles. Poole notes that the digestibility and cheap production value of the books were also points of contention for critics. Thus, the ASEs first drew scrutiny as enabling or encouraging middlebrow consumption by linking men "to the inveterately feminized realms of leisure, culture, domestic sentimentality, and reading itself" via increased reading for pleasure (Poole 478). Their cheapness was, as most affordable products are, praised for increasing accessibility to books. Yet, this very accessibility becomes a problem for critics. If any American can participate in national print culture regardless of gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, or place of origin, this accessibility provides the opportunity for a promiscuous mixing of previously segregated reading publics—and most at risk was, of course,

America 1800-1940, ed J.A. Mangan and James Walvin (1987); Linda K. Kerber "May All Our citizens be soldiers and all our soldiers citizens: the ambiguities of female citizenship in the new nation" In *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory* ed, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Shelia Tobais (1990)

the masculine public. As others have noted, women's consumption of cultural and material products increased significantly beginning in the 1910s, when more opportunities were available to women because of war. This consumption only increased in the postwar years, and women's increasing consumption of these products demonstrated for critics the feminization of a traditionally patriarchal activity.

What is of particular interest to me is the concern with emasculating military servicemembers by *selecting books for them*. As ASE selections frequently overlapped with Book-of-the-Month club selections and with best sellers, prompting criticism of servicemember reading as a leisure activity which since the late nineteenth century had been gendered female. Poole argues that what critics saw similarities between the BoMC and ASEs as the dangerous potential of the ASEs to mimic—and emulate—feminized institutions. In addition to similarities in *function*—the ASEs were selected by a panel of "experts," shipments were regular and automatic—the ASE and BoMC shared titles in common as well. In fact, a 1945 survey conducted by contemporary cultural researchers Henry C. Link and Harry Arthur Hope demonstrates that twenty out of twenty-seven books reported by the 1,982 reader-respondents in their study were also ASEs. The results of Link and Hope's broader study demonstrate that overall, men and women across a wider range of social classes were increasingly reading the same books. The increased and diversified readership was not the only perceived threat the ASEs posed to high culture. As Merve Emre notes in *Paraliterary* (2017), readers modes of engagement also changed dramatically in this period. Emre explores *paraliterary* engagement—"reading imitatively… emotionally… faddishly… [and] for information" (11)—which stands in contrast to the more "autonomous forms of reading" such as "close reading, critical reading, depth reading" heralded by high cultural institutions like the university and the academic journal.

These four kinds of paraliterary engagement—what Emre also calls “bad reading”—are also, perhaps unsurprisingly, middlebrow modes of consumption.

As discussed previously, the BoMC donated over 150,000 club-selected books (free of charge) to servicemembers during the restrictive months during which Title V of the Soldier Voting Law was enforced—a law which *actively prevented servicemembers from gaining access to print materials* without the express approval of the OWI. After the war, fears about middlebrow culture and men’s emasculation (and assumed feminization) seeped into society at large and, according to James Gilbert, “The mass culture debate of the 1950s generated a host of fears and recriminations about the creeping feminization of American society” (Gilbert 189). Clement Greenberg, a prominent American essayist and visual art critic of the Modernist period, was (like Virginia Woolf) a sharp critic of the middlebrow and “blamed middlebrow venues such as the *New Yorker*[46] for [the] debasement of masculine high culture” (Poole 467). *Instant* gratification and accessibility—represented here in the middlebrow magazine—were gendered feminine as women increasingly participated in print culture. Similarly, the perceived *style* of engagement—reading for pleasure and other kinds of “bad” reading—came to be coded middlebrow as well. And yet, as we will continue to see throughout my dissertation, consumer culture, gluttonous spending, and paperbacks themselves are an integral and intimate part of the mythology of the American Dream.

II. “You Might Become Their Pin-Up Girl”: Unmanly Reverence for Betty Smith

While the ASEs were largely a successful, positive project which was well-received, critics expressed anxiety as the war progressed that men were being emasculated by reading texts so closely associated with feminine values (an idea projected onto the Book-of-the-Month Club

[46] established in 1925, one year before the Book-of-the-Month Club

selections). This is in large part due to the assumed *motive* of a soldier-reader rather than the particular text they might be reading. As Emre notes, "reading to feel" characterized the "bad" reader in the mid-twentieth century. The image of a soldier taking comfort in, let alone weeping over, a text like Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* threatened critics' perception of the military masculinity which was conceived of as pivotal to winning the War. A thorough comparison of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Armed Services Editions necessitates a solid grounding in discussions of military masculinity and its relationship to the American Dream. Understanding that military masculinity evidences the U.S.'s increasing conception of itself as a masculine nation, represented in the musculature of its warriors, we can examine a fiction of American *national* identity (or ideal American identity) as necessarily masculine and dominating—thus, the individualism which is so closely tied to the American ideal is not only a desire to *avoid relying* on others (nations, neighbors, families, etcetera), but in fact to dominate them[47]. Marketing a particular idea of manhood and masculinity to boys and young men, Belkin implies, influences their desire to emulate and perpetuate that image. After the Great Depression and as the Great War approached, the values symbolized by military masculinity became "less… one among many normative masculinities than as the paradigmatic embodiment of normativity" (Belkin 12). The power of imagery promoting the primacy of military masculinity in the U.S. only increased with the beginning of WWII (and continued to gain momentum for some time

[47] It is worth noting, however, that as many scholars point out this idea of the masculine and military masculinity came about in the nineteenth century during the Spanish-American War and was not always an integral part of American national identity. See also Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers* and, *Does Khaki Become You: The Militarization of Women's Lives* (London: South End Press, 2003); Ernest Howard Crosby, "The Military Idea of Manliness," *Independent*, 53, 18 April 1901, 874-5; Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine American Wars* (1998), among others.

afterward)[48] Thus, to critics the ASEs threatened this archetype of dominating, independent and individualistic men by removing the readers' autonomy and limiting servicemembers' reading choices. Yet, even considering soldier-readers' limited textual selection, the *mode of engagement* was still under the individual reader's purview.

The anxiety around what servicemembers were reading and how they were responding to the material seems less about the outcome of the war and more about a scramble for control of "traditional" gender norms. Though the text itself was not named by critics, the emotional tenor of servicemember letters sent home to mothers, sisters, and wives in response to *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (and others) sparked latent anxiety about emasculation (and by extension, the ability of the U.S. and the Allies to win the war). Jessie VanHecke ("Mrs. M.J."), mother of a young deployed seaman, relays her son's enjoyment at the possession of Smith's book: "*I am sole owner of the only copy of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," he writes, "*It has been read by all the officers, able seamen, and now the Mess Boys have it*."[49] Mrs. VanHecke explains that her son, Jim, was sent the novel as a gift from his new bride, whom he left for war only a few days after their wedding, the Christmas after its autumn release. Her letter demonstrates that even so soon into its publication history, servicemembers were clamoring for a copy of the 500-page-text. Jamieson mentions *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* as one of twenty-nine of the first 120 ASEs which proved to be "outstandingly popular":

> Twenty-four of these were fiction. Of the favorite fiction books, seven were western novels, one was a collection of connected humorous stories… There was one humorous novel… and six bestsellers, chiefly of the recent past: Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Selby's *Starbuck*, Marshall's *Great Smith,* and Mason's *Rivers of Glory*. (328-9)

[48] For more on the particular imagery utilized in magazine advertisements, film, and other visual media which institutionalized military masculinity in the U.S. via the symbolism of WWII soldiering, see Christina Jarvis and Susan Faludi.

[49] Betty Smith Papers, UNC Chapel Hill 3837

Although Marshall's *Great Smith*, Selby's *Starbuck*, and Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* were also popular enough to elicit a second ASE print, Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is not only the most explicitly middlebrow in content and character, but also the only bestseller of the first 120 ASEs written by a woman author. The story of a little girl who grows up to read her way out of her impoverished, immigrant neighborhood in Brooklyn turns out to be a story of universal appeal among those deployed.

Thus, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* directly challenges the primacy of military masculinity in the concept of the American Dream not only in its content, form, and authorship, but in the emotional tenor it elicits from its wartime readers overseas as well. When "Mrs. M.J." writes to Smith about the popularity of her book among the men deployed with her son, she stresses that "*it would please them more than I can express to have a word*" from Smith, who she is convinced "*might become their "Pin Up Girl*" were she to write to them, noting that "*They enjoy anything out of the ordinary, a bit of attention thrills them.*" The other three servicemember letters in the UNC Chapel Hill Smith Collection detail a similar fascination with Smith, whose novel is widely known to have been first drafted as a memoir, and the story she created. I argue that Francie's aspiration to grow beyond her impoverished Brooklyn neighborhood and exist in a world where she can read and accumulate books as well as things[50] get to the heart of my conception of the American Dream as an inherently middlebrow one, characterized by striving, aspiration, materialism, and façade.

The novel is at once the story of Francie Nolan, the story of her entire family, and the story of her Brooklyn community. Francie's father, Johnny Nolan, is the last in a long line of

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[50] The narrator notes early in the story that "Poor people have a great passion for huge quantities of things," and this passion (though not the *actual* accumulation of objects) remains true for Francie to a certain extent even as she begins to move between social classes (39).

undependable and weak but loving Nolan men who dies at the age of thirty-six, leaving his already impoverished wife and children to pay for his funeral before fending for themselves. Francie's story is framed by those of her mother and father, aunts, grandmother, and neighbors, all of whom have distinct perspectives of a shared American Dream: all want to rise out of poverty, all believe achieving the Dream has *something* to do with education[51] (though the particular kinds of education differ), and all have a strong desire to accumulate *things* to demonstrate this economic and social change. Although her story is framed by the histories of others, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is still the story of Francie Nolan, who develops from a child of five or six to a fifteen-year-old who must pretend she is seventeen in order to work instead of pursuing her lifelong dream of going to college. The novel is simultaneously hyper-attentive to her particular struggles and needs as a young woman, and ambivalent about the concept of womanhood. Francie is particularly attached to her father and resents what she perceives as his mistreatment by women in her life. As a consequence, she claims to hate women, and yet her social structure is almost entirely made up of women, with the exceptions of her younger brother and father (who dies young). Francie's story—as an adolescent coming of age, a second-generation American, and a young woman—is one of constant struggle and contradiction. This struggle and these contradictions are modeled not only in Francie's character, but in her community more broadly as well. The "tree" that grows in Brooklyn is both a particular tree Francie notices as a child, and, as one soldier notes in a letter to the author, the Rommely-Nolan family tree. I examine the novel's conception of American identity in three primary sites: literacy, land ownership, and war.

[51] One of countless examples: Katie perceives that Miss Jackson, Francie's impeccably dressed, well-mannered, but impoverished teacher, is different from the other poor women because of her education. "Education! That was it! It was education that will pull them out of the grime and the dirt… That's what Mary Rommely, her mother, had been telling her all those years. Only her mother did not have the one clear word: education" (205)

Francie's American Dream odyssey begins not with her own aspiration to education, but with her illiterate grandmother. The narrator not only contextualizes Francie's world for us, but often focalizes different characters to give a broader and yet deeper perspective of her world. Francie's introduction to Brooklyn is prefaced by the love story of Katie Rommley (her mother) and Johnny Nolan (her father), and this part of the novel is focalized through Katie (thus furthering the impression that Francie's story is not hers alone). Just after she has given birth to Francie, Katie (a new mother, seventeen years old) asks her mother (Mary, an Austrian immigrant) what she must do to ensure that Francie is not confined to the fate of "bearing seven children, bringing them up, watching three of them die, and knowing that those who lived were doomed to hunger and hardship" (79). Katie's mother articulates for her a vision of the American Dream unattainable for herself because of her illiteracy:

> There is here, what is not in the old country. In spite of hard unfamiliar things, there is here—hope. In the old country, a man can be no more than his father, providing he works hard… In the old country, a man is given to the past. Here he belongs to the future. In this land, he may be what he will, if he has the good heart and the way of working honestly at all the right things. (80)

Here, Mary explicitly affirms the bootstrap work ethic of the American Dream. She believes that the ability and willingness to read allow one to take advantage of all of the opportunity available in this new country. She contrasts the opportunity of the United States with the lack thereof in Austria and argues that her failure to seize this opportunity is not because of structural barriers inherent to the U.S., but rather through her own lack of literacy. When Katie protests, noting that she can read and is still poor, Mary explains that she did not know how to educate her daughters properly because of her own ignorance of the opportunities available, once again brushing aside any argument against the promise of the American Dream. Although reading and writing are essential, Mary argues that in actuality these skills make up only part of what she understands as

the three keys to American Dream achievement. Imagination is critical in surviving the coldness of the world, and one must have not only the truth of the two good books (Shakespeare and the Bible), but also the warmth of tradition and the solidness of a home—land—of her own.

Mary stresses that land is the third essential key to true American Dream attainment. In contrast to the first two elements which were skills to be taught, land ownership is unavoidably enmeshed in the institutional and material barriers Mary has so far refused to acknowledge. Thus, in the emphasis on land ownership, American Dream attainment becomes more than an intellectual ideal and begins to take material form. When Katie protests that she is too poor to make rent, let alone buy land, Mary insists:

> Yet you must do that. For thousands of years, our people have been peasants working the land of others. This was in the old country. Here we do better working with our hands in the factory. There is a part of each day that does not belong to the master but which the worker owns himself. That is good. But to own a bit of land is better; a bit of land that we may hand down to our children… that will raise us up on the face of the earth. (83)

For Mary, the great beauty of the United States is the opportunity for the family tree to take deeper root, and to see the improvements and successes of successive generations. Mary instructs Katie in the ways of saving money to buy this land. Mary insists that above all else—above having a good heart and a strong work ethic, above luck and fate—"The secret lies in the reading and the writing," noting that she herself had been "robbed" of land which she had been fraudulently sold "because [she] could not read" (81, 85). Herein lies the importance of reading and writing. She commands Katie, "First you will read on the paper that the land is yours. Only then you will pay" (85). Over the course of their life, Katie does save up enough to buy land—just enough for her husband's cemetery plot when he dies of "acute alcoholism and pneumonia" (284, 283). Even then, she does just as her mother had told her, and demands to read the deed thrice before paying.

Francie's pursuit of the American Dream is thus framed through a generational struggle for belonging and achievement of an authentic "American" identity. Even the section of town in which she lives (Williamsburg) is filled with symbols of American "authenticity."[52] Beyond this "authentic" New World regalia, the immigrants of Williamsburg actively attempt to resist the "new" American ways, while their children long to assimilate. When the teacher in Francie's school calls roll at the beginning of the year, she asks the students their lineage along with their name. Francie is pleased to discover that she is "the only one in her classroom whose parents were born in America," noting that "in the Nolan neighborhood, if you could prove *you* had been born in America, it was equivalent to a Mayflower standing" (169). Though lineage is important among the children in this immigrant neighborhood, it is clear that in the wider social circle, immigrants are categorized and judged by their economic and thus social class.

The politics of identity and belonging in immigrant Williamsburg is complicated, however, by individuals' actual attempts to fully assimilate beyond their community. Francie is first exposed to the problems of alienation and interpersonal cruelty in a childhood interaction at a vaccine clinic. When Francie and her brother must get vaccinated before their first day of school, they go alone without their mother (at the ages of six and five, respectively). Although their mother warns them to wash and look presentable when they go to the inoculation site, Francie and Neely forget, and arrive covered in dirt from the mud pies they had been making. When he sees Francie covered in dirt, the young attending comments to the nurse that filthy, poor people like these should not be allowed to reproduce—thinking that because he is serving in an immigrant neighborhood, Francie must not be able to understand him if he speaks in English.

[52] This authenticity is primarily racialized as Native versus early white settler—one can find Native American images throughout, but no Native Americans (134). Rather, the Native American images serve as a reminder of what existed before the "melting pot" of Williamsburg. The children categorize and identify themselves and one another by their degree of immigrant heritage (noted above as well as on 189).

Francie expects the nurse, who, as Francie mentally notes, is the daughter of an immigrant herself and is *from* the neighborhood, to defend her, if only as a motherly figure. When she instead distances herself from Francie (wanting herself to marry a doctor and never again be associated with Williamsburg) and verbally agrees that the poor should be sterilized, Francie realizes the distinct and limited options for those who achieve the middleclass, middlebrow American Dream. In particular, there are two: "A person who pulls himself up from a low environment via the bootstrap route has two choices. Having risen above his environment, he can forget it; or, he can rise above it and never forget it and keep compassion and understanding in his heart for those he has left behind" (145). As Francie matures and vows to leave the confines of her immigrant community, she resolves to make the latter choice.

Just as her grandmother had intuited, literacy is Francie's way out of poverty and out of the limited opportunities available in their impoverished neighborhood, and the significance of literacy as a tool for American Dream achievement is emphasized both by Francie's final visit to her neighborhood library and her epiphany upon seeing a young neighborhood girl reading under the Tree of Heaven. Early in her education, Francie begins to see the world as "hers for the reading," and the association of literacy with access to broader "American" opportunities only deepens as the novel progresses (164). Although she is prevented by financial circumstance from finishing high school, Francie works in a press clipping office as a reader—a job that exposes her to what she believes is a broader and deeper education than she could ever receive formally in high school—and takes entrance exams to enter the University of Michigan without a high school diploma. Having worked "across the bridge," taken summer college courses, experienced heartbreak with older men, and, in essence, *grown up*, Francie realizes that nothing will ever be the same after she leaves her neighborhood for college. Her final tour of her childhood

neighborhood is filled with both disappointments and epiphanies. When she approaches the library desk and asks for a recommendation, the librarian recommends the same title she always had without ever having made eye contact with Francie. Her interaction with the librarian reinforces that, like so much else in her dilapidated neighborhood, she is seen as only one of many scraggly children, although she is almost seventeen. In spite of this disappointing realization, Francie resolves to remember everything "just as it is now," recognizing that "in years to come, there would be no old neighborhood to come back to" (485). In fact, "After the war," we're told, "the city was going to tear down the tenements… and build a model housing project on the site; a place of living where," in contrast to the visceral experience of her childhood, "sunlight and air were to be trapped, measured and weighed, and doled out so much per resident" (485). Though she will never forget it, she knows she will never return, and the neighborhood will cease to exist soon after she leaves, its character replaced by a cold and calculating "model housing project" which will incur new hardship on new residents. Like so many other middlebrow protagonists, Francie's origins are made anonymous in the very real sense that as she moves beyond them, they will disappear behind her. In this way, her story becomes "every man's story," and her hardships, while painfully specific, become more universal within the context of the American Dream.

Although by the end of the novel it is clear that Francie embodies the middlebrow protagonists' "American" quality of always *striving,* her interaction with Florry Wendy and her recognition of the Tree of Heaven suggest that she views her origins as deeply significant to her final metamorphosis of character. When she returns to her childhood home and sees Florry sitting on the fire escape, under the shade of the Tree of Heaven, reading a novel as Francie used to do, she recognizes herself in the young girl. In addressing Florry by her own name, "Francie,"

both when she first sees Florry and when she leaves her home in the final words of the novel, it is clear that Francie will not forget her environment as she rises above it, as her childhood inoculation nurse had. Rather, Francie demonstrates her resolve to embrace the second of the two paths to American Dream achievement, and already demonstrates compassion and understanding for those she is leaving behind. Francie's rumination on the Tree of Heaven in this same scene suggests that what has been sacrificed is not only *necessary* for Francie's upward mobility, but *good* in and of itself, as the Rommely family tree will finally bear the fruit of the American Dream as her grandmother had wished. Although the Tree of Heaven had been cut down sometime in Francie's adolescence as a result of residents' complaints, Francie notes with astonishment that "the tree hadn't died… it hadn't died," and in fact "A new tree had grown from the stump and… it had started to grow towards the sky again" (490). She realizes, as one servicemember notes in a letter to Smith, that this tree which has been neglected, abused, and persecuted represents her family more than "the fir tree, that the Nolans had cherished with waterings and manurings," and which "had long since sickened and died" (491). Francie's misnaming of Florry—as she leaves the neighborhood for good, she whispers "Goodbye, Francie," more to herself than to the girl—identifies the process by which she is leaving her environment as intimately connected to and rooted in that very environment. Similarly, this act acknowledges that she is leaving a past iteration of herself behind as she ventures out of the neighborhood for good.

The Tree of Heaven, which "nothing could destroy," was framed in servicemember letters to Smith as a symbol of not only the resilience of the Rommely family of Brooklyn, New York, but of those who hoped to achieve the American Dream (491). Servicemen seem to relate to Smith's novel as an American mobility story rather than an immigrant story, marking an

important and common facet of the American Dream mythology: the trope of the U.S. as a 'melting pot' which eliminates (or simply ignores) cultural difference and institutionalized racism to emphasize the importance of, as the adage goes, 'pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.' Like Francie's grandmother, readers of the Armed Services Edition of the novel seem to cling to the promise of the American Dream as constructed in this novel without regard to the boundaries of difference emphasized in an immigrant bildungsroman. Francie's story is thus read as that of anyone imagining themselves alone as they set out for the Dream. The tree under which Florry is reading inspires Francie to continue her striving, just as it inspires the servicemembers reading *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* during the "*most trying days of battle and battle fatigue depression*" to, for example, "*carry on with the hope someday I'd be able to start my own family tree growing in Texas*.[53]" Although the novel is in many ways deeply rooted in Brooklyn as a specific locale, servicemen claim that "*a knowledge of that fair city is not a prerequisite for enjoyment of* [Smith's] *book; for it is the story of every child who finds it within himself to strive through ugliness and poverty, seeking a meaning and a nameless beauty—and at the same time realizing a beauty that is itself the utter drabness with which he is surrounded*.[54]"

While *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is certainly only one of many ASEs sent to servicemembers overseas, readers of Smith's novel credit in their letters to her the broader practice of reading to their survival during the war. PFC Eugene A. Kurtz argues that "*Fighting a war is such a hellish reality that we need an occasional let-up in order to reestablish our beliefs in striving for life rather than in trying to stamp it out.*" Smith's book, and Francie's story, give Kurtz this "let-up" and "more," which he can only express with his "*gratitude*" for the opportunity to read such a text, provided both by Smith as the author and by the Council on

[53] J.H. Power, Navy, to Smith (1944)
[54] PFC Eugene A. Kurtz, Army, to Smith (1944)

Books in Wartime as the distributor of the text[55]. J.H. Power feels similarly indebted to Smith for "saving" him when he struggled with "battle fatigue depression." Newly hopeful that he will live to start his "*own family tree growing in Texas*," Power writes Smith that "*With all the love in the world my own true happiness is growing as I always wished*" in his little family at home, and that he owes her for this incredible gift. The greatest honor—which he is convinced he owes her for the inspiration she has given him—he can think of is continuing Smith's memory in his own family. He tells her that he and his wife "*think very definitely that Betty Smith is a lovely name we assure you our very first daughter will be named Betty Smith Power and this in your honor is least we can do for the help you've inspired in our times*" and for providing for him "*the sincere happiness & joy I needed while I was on what might have been the last limb of life!*".

It is perhaps this outpouring of feeling which made critics of the middlebrow aspects of the ASEs uncomfortable, as the sentiment expressed stands at odds with the ideals of military masculinity as controlled, genteel, yet dominating. It is important to recognize that participation in the construction and pursuit of military masculinity was presented by the U.S. government, military, and media as the much-needed salve with which American men could soothe the psychological and emotional wounds of the Great Depression. The Great Depression had threatened the role of the man as provider[56] for himself and his family, but also destabilized the notion of the 'Self-Made Man' as the hero of the American Dream (although this myth would resurface in the postwar iteration of the Dream). While the ideal of American identity as 'self-made' was challenged by the Great Depression, the military apparatus of WWII purported to 'turn boys into men.' Belkin highlights, among other contradictions, the incompatibility of the

[55] Kurtz is the only servicemember in this batch of letters to specifically note that his copy of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is an Armed Services Edition, and thanks the CBW for the opportunity to lose himself in the novel.
[56] See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, p.6

equally promoted images of military masculinity as aggression/dominance/empire and control/gentility/mercy. Although self-reliance, individualism, and independent thought have been prized as American intellectual ideals[57], the practical needs of the military apparatus required conformity and homogeneity as much as was possible.

The military apparatus purported itself to be the great "producer" of American men, and yet the anonymity and conformity it demands of servicemembers challenges the equally "American" values of self-reliance, dominance over others, and independence. Belkin argues that the identities of idealized literary characters who emulate ideal military masculinity are "structured by confusion about a central contradiction, in particular a penchant for both sadism and masochism, both of which are coded as masculine and unmasculine… But that is just the point. Confusion about contradictions which structure soldiers' identities… is central for understanding how modern American military masculinity works" (9-11). Like much gender presentation, the military masculine was negatively defined—against feminine characteristics and activities—as it was positively defined through propaganda. Christina Jarvis argues in *The Male Body at War* (2004) that the lasting iteration of American masculinity was realized most fully in the descriptions and depictions of the physical strength, fortitude, and masculine power of the male body at war, particularly as constructed between the Great Depression and WWII in such transitions in national symbols as that from delicate Lady Liberty to the more aggressive image of (post-1930) Uncle Sam, both of which reinforced the image of masculinity as the able *male* body. The ideal, masculine warrior was imagined to be "publicly engaged, hypermale, patriarchal, reasonable, and vigorous: backsliding would ruinously sap American military strength," and the reality of the psychological traumas of war were not considered, or were

[57] Consider, especially, my discussion of Emerson at the beginning of this chapter.

considered *weaknesses* which also threatened the masculine ideal (Poole 474). The concept of American masculinity as embodied in the able, muscular male body (at war) and was also reinforced through the "careful distancing between [the] actual disabled, often *infirm body*" of the U.S.'s state head, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), and "his skillfully orchestrated *body politic*," a feat achieved "primarily through visual representations… elaborate public performances, thoughtfully chosen photographs, and selected cartoons and illustrations" (Jarvis 29, emphasis added). "[T]he language of feminine sentiment" borne in many servicemembers' letters, the leisure of reading, and other feminine-middlebrow markers threatened the paradigm of military masculinity as firmly rooted in the bodily experience of man-at-war. Yet, it is difficult to imagine depriving servicemembers of that which sustains them through "battle fatigue depression," loneliness, and the "hellish reality" which threatened to "stamp out" their belief in "striving for life." It seemed that these soldiers were, contrary to critics' stated beliefs, not to be trusted and thus must be told what to read and do.

Conclusion

The façade of objective concern is in fact one of the primary sites of the gendered debate around reading in the decades between the founding of the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1926 and the end of the ASE project in 1947. One of the primary concerns with automated book distribution in this period remained a fear of emasculation projected onto the nation—a national anxiety about the emasculating powers of propaganda. In his 1940 bestseller, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*, Mortimer J. Adler provides an excellent example of the futility of the project these critics attempted to pursue. Adler claims to identify "not only the problem of how to read, but also of what to read," and promises that by providing them with the basic foundation on which they can build a stronger critical reading ability and develop *better*

taste in literature, his readers will know both what to read and how to read it (viii). Adler presents his ultimate concern as a national one, and thus he envisions reading as a means to increasing the patriotism of the average citizen. He simultaneously appeals to *a nation of readers* and a much narrower sub-group of *intellectuals*. In the preface, Adler warns that "Those who take no pleasure in knowing and understanding should not bother to read it. Those who believe that all their leisure time should be devoted to the effortless pleasures of the movies, the radio, and light romances should not bother to read it" (vii). Rather, he writes for "the rest of us"—a presumably different audience (vii). His condemnation of the movies, the radio, and light romances—so-called *effortless pleasures*—evidence a now-familiar critique of middlebrow entertainment. Adler claims that *How to Read a Book* is "in short, a book about reading in relation to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—that is, in relation to fundamental American values (ix). Adler's bold appropriation of one of the most famous lines in the Declaration of Independence is reminiscent of the kind of appropriation we see in other middlebrow venues.

The title itself, *How to Read a Book, The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*, seems to be aimed at a non-specialized audience which *aspires to improve themselves*—or, as we know, a *middlebrow audience*. Thus, Adler's concern with combatting (presumed) feminine values of unspecialized knowledge, effortless pleasure, and indiscriminate reading taste with (somehow much more) masculine values of knowledge, dominance, and power evidence the effort to simultaneously create, control, and maintain assumedly traditional gender norms through a critique of the middlebrow. Adler is only one of many contemporary critics of the middlebrow[58],

[58] See also Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1958); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939); Russell Lynes, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Popular Culture" (1944); Van Wyck Brooks, "Highbrow and Lowbrow" (1958); H.L. Mencken, "Mush for the Multitudes" (1914); Lawrence Abbot, "The Middlebrows" (1927)

but his contradictory statements that “the primary aim is to read well, not widely,” and “The more you read, of course, the better”, demonstrate a fundamental tension in criticism of middlebrow reading habits and structures deeply rooted in concerns about American masculinity: according to this logic, reading is simultaneously masculine and feminine—reading more allows you to become more knowledgeable (a trait he considers masculine), but reading too much demonstrates a lack of specialization and focus (somehow a uniquely feminine problem). Discourses evidencing a desire to make men masculine—including those expressing anxiety over what men were reading overseas—actually demonstrate the impossibility of fulfilling this desire. The same values (knowledge, for example) are considered either masculine or feminine depending on the critic’s view of a situation, which is why wild accusations about the implications of men and reading fail to present concrete alternatives. If not reading, what should men be doing? If not *that* book, *what* book? Is a text like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, for example, inherently threatening, or does the threat actually lie in the reader’s individual emotional response to the text?

To address the first question, it is helpful to consider the ASEs within the context of other recreational print material available to servicemembers overseas. As previously discussed in this chapter, servicemembers had access to magazines (and were able to request magazines not housed in the library) through the Library Section protocol in each unit. The magazines on the unit set list were: *Life, Reader’s Digest, Esquire, Time, Newsweek, Saturday Evening Post, New Yorker, Cosmopolitan, Omnibook,* and *Coronet. Esquire*, who’s tagline “The Magazine for Men” implies ‘masculine’ subject matter distinct from general or women’s magazines, is an excellent example of the contradictory conversations around the ‘masculine’ activities of men. The cover of the September 1945 issue boasts the inclusion of “Fiction | Sports | Humor | Clothes | Art |

Cartoons." Without even opening the magazine, we are presented with a message which contradicts critics' generalized fears about men's reading habits.

Figure 1.1[59]

Articles in this issue range from "The Biggest Game Fish Ever Landed" to "How to Play Knock Poker," and seem to clearly define the boundaries of masculine leisure as intimately connected to dominance, whether of nature or one's (male) opponents in a friendly game. The cover image itself purports the primary form of male dominance as sexual in nature: the cartoon image of four women dressed in Army (WACs) and Navy (WAVES) uniforms seated in front of and behind a male dressed in civilian suit and tie—and covered in lipstick—emerging from a "tunnel of love," inverts the threat of female servicemembers by situating them as sexual objects for the civilian male, initially complicates our understanding of military masculinity and national virility.

[59] Image courtesy of the *Esquire* "Classics" online archive

However, the civilian male's lipstick-covered face and the female servicemembers' buxom figures implicitly reinforce women's primary role as sexual objects rather than serious professional—or sexual—threats by coding them securely within the male gaze. In her analysis of the image of the female soldier in WWII film and advertising, Anna Froula notes that "American fears of female sexual agency" lead advertisers of women's cosmetics to promote their products as protecting "the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely—under any circumstances" (Avon, May 1943 p.43, qtd Froula 158). The tension over military servicemembers—and American *military* masculinity overall—resulted in such contradictory messages as OWI's assurance that military women were chaste and had good morals despite their simultaneous efforts to "sell[] the sexual desirability of servicewomen" (Froula 159).

The unstable foundation of criticisms of masculine and feminine reading destabilizes notions of the middlebrow's inherent femininity, but rather evidence that the middlebrow—if we take just one element, *lack of intellectual effort*—is in fact present in every facet of American culture at different times and in different places. Leisure is not inherently wrong; further, *reading* during one's leisure time is not inherently wrong. It is not even inherently wrong for someone to *read romance novels*. In fact, leisure is celebrated, promoted, and protected in and by the upper class, particularly before the vast expansion of the middle class after WWII. Leisure is, then, moralized through the lenses of class and gender. Women and the larger middle class are as threatening to elite bookselling as they are in the ballot box. Rather, it seems that the combination of what one reads and who one is produces the ultimate criticism labelled "middlebrow." These messy discourses deconstruct the idea that the middlebrow could be solely feminine, in part because the "performance" of either gender is not unique to the middlebrow space. In the CBW's 1942 roundtable, Colonel Greene (Army) argued that books are, as I argue

throughout this dissertation, part of a nation's conception of itself: Greene notes that it is not only the most "important" or critically acclaimed books which make up a nation's self-conception, but rather is instead the books people actually *read*. Yet, criticism of servicemembers' reading, leisure, and home-life habits—and the connections between these behaviors and sexuality—become even more explicit as war veterans return home and attempt to make use of their GI bill entitlements, as I explore in the following chapter.

Interestingly, the immediately perceptible "Americanness" of Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* directly challenges the primacy of military masculinity in the concept of the American Dream by troubling the notion that the Dream is achieved through supremacy or dominance of some kind. Francie, like other protagonists discussed later in this dissertation (including Jay Gatsby and Lorelei Lee in Chapter three), strives for the American Dream not with dominating strength, but with quiet mastery of a carefully curated personal identity. Thus the text, and soldiers' responses to it, evidence the primacy of the seemingly contradictory values of individualism and community. One needs a community to nurture them and to participate in, but one also needs to become independent of that community and demonstrate self-reliance. It is important to remember that the Council on Books in Wartime committee members were made up of both civilian and military volunteers, and that the Council itself was a civilian enterprise. Thus, though there were some critics who questioned the distribution of some texts, the Council assuaged the demand for *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by printing it in subsequent Armed Services Editions. What is so threatening about servicemembers' emotional connections to Francie in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is seemingly that engagement with such a text promotes a distraction from the violence of war abroad (masculine) and nurtures thoughts of peacetime at home (feminine), particularly through the lens of an adolescent girl's coming-of-age. While it may seem

that servicemembers' connection to a male protagonist may have seemed less threatening, my examination of *The Great Gatsby* in Chapter 3 will demonstrate that the gender of the central character is not as paramount as the perceived middlebrow (and therefore feminized) elements of the text as well as the modes of its consumption. Yet, one of the aims of the civilian Council on Books in Wartime was "to find out why this world keeps having new wars, and why we can't take a war to help us build a new world when we get back to peace" (Round Table, 35-6). *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is in fact an excellent example of the Council's ideal novel, which "does not idealize war, but makes you feel that some things are worth fighting for and makes you wish you had been there" (Round Table 35). In the end, it seems that critics' anxiety about the middlebrow nature of the Armed Services Editions was in fact correct. It is this very fact which I argue evidences the inherent middlebrow quality of the American Dream itself. Print culture which encourages striving for the Dream which requires even more striving, presented in an accessible (one might say democratic) form must necessarily be considered middlebrow. Because it is so essential to understanding American culture and values, the middlebrow should be understood as more than a derogatory term, but rather a neutral category by which we can understand the relationship between aspiration, consumerism, print culture, and the enduring fiction of the American Dream as one in which hard work can yield the success and comfort of suburban middle-class life.

In this chapter, I argued that the CBW's ASE project and the Book-of-the-Month Club are at once highly gendered, and yet are projects which call to question the relevance of gendered categories of print culture by destabilizing the traditional understanding of the middlebrow as highly feminine. I argue that by comparing the BoMC and ASE book distribution projects, as well as reading Smith's articulation of the American Dream in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* alongside

servicemember letters in response to her novel, we can see how foundationally the American Dream is rooted in the middlebrow, and how the "American" value of military masculinity is both threatened by and dependent on this idea of the middlebrow.

As I will discuss in the following chapter, the middlebrow imbues itself even more fully in American culture after the war through opportunities made possible by the GI bill housing and education benefits available to all servicemembers who served at least ninety-six consecutive days. In Chapter two, we will see how the book distribution projects, as well as the gendered anxiety surrounding them, impact the domestic and academic spheres as well. Poole notes that "Just as the average level of education among Americans increased postwar (largely due to the GI Bill), so too did the overall frequency of book buying and book reading… Sundry retail outlets peddled paperbacks that cost no more than a movie ticket, encouraging men of all social classes to consume them… As a percentage of Americans' recreational spending, books reached a new high (32 percent)" (475). As I will discuss in the following chapter, this increased spending does not necessarily denote increased *readership*—rather, the value of books as material objects with implicit cultural capital increases through the war and is evident in postwar suburban life, particularly in the use of books as decoration and symbol of homeowners' racial and class statuses. The movement from the city to the suburbs, strongly encouraged by the GI bill, also prompted further anxiety about American masculinity as "some critics saw the suburbs as emasculating given their enshrinement of domesticity, especially of the nuclear family" (475). As college enrollments and suburban planned communities expand, critics fear the cultural and political power of the rapidly expanding middle class. Chapter two will explore the ways in which middlebrow institutions like those discussed in this chapter helped to transform the

academic, domestic, and political cultures of the U.S. as GIs return, and demonstrate the final evolution of the 1950s iteration of the American Dream in the postwar era.

CHAPTER 2: **An Aesthetic**
"All the Veteran Sons and Daughters of All the People"; Assembling the Material of the American Dream

> [I]t becomes a question whether the university society will assimilate the veteran or whether the veteran will metamorphose the university society.
>
> Curtis E. Avery (1946)

> In the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent world, except when some shadow of its evil fell over a column in the newspaper… Here domesticity could flourish, forgetful of the exploitation on which so much of it was based. Here individuality could prosper, oblivious of the pervasive regimentation beyond.
>
> -Lewis Mumford, *The City of History* (1961)

Preface:

What is considered the 'postwar era' in the United States is, I argue, a deeply misleading term. While WWII may have 'ended' in 1945, demobilization was slow, and was not fully completed before the geopolitical tension and cultural 'warfare' of the Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet Union began in 1947. The construction of a particular and enduring American Dream mythology—which continues to be reified in U.S. legislation since the 1970s, as well as in a variety of media—coalesced in great part due to the anxieties, pressures, and opportunities of wartime both during and shortly after WWII. This mythology is in many ways dependent on the paradigm of *military masculinity*, a term which I borrow from Aaron Belkin (2012), and the elusive concept of middlebrow culture, both of which originate in the early 20th century, but gain an urgency during WWII which is not lessened in the immediate 'post-war' period, but rather further integrated into American culture. It is necessary to contextualize the intensity of military masculinity in the WWII period as not simply a result of wartime need, but also as the much-needed salve with which American men could soothe the psychological and emotional wounds of the Great Depression, which had threatened the role of the man as provider[60] for himself and

[60] See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, p.6

his family. While the Great Depression also destabilized the notion of the 'Self-Made Man,' the military apparatus of WWII purported to 'turn boys into men' and thus revitalize American masculinity. The practical needs of the military apparatus required conformity and homogeneity as much as was possible, despite challenging the equally "American" values of self-reliance, dominance over others, and independence.

As military masculinity becomes emblematic of what it means to be a "real man" in the American imagination[61], so too does the materialistic drive of the middlebrow serve as a reminder of the freedoms and wealth afforded to U.S. citizens[62]. The escalation of World War II brought with it a dramatic change in American culture and attitudes, and an increased anxiety about the feminization of American men. The official end of WWII does not lessen the cultural influences of military masculinity and the middlebrow—rather, these are intensified as WWII ends and the Cold War begins. Viewing "America" and the American Dream as inherently middlebrow concepts demonstrates not only the impact of the post-WWII GI bill entitlements on U.S. higher education and suburban cultures, but also why the two should be studied together as foundational elements of the enduring mythology of the American Dream in the 'post-war' era. I argue that the primacy of military masculinity is both reinforced and destabilized through middlebrow print culture through the 1940s and 1950s and becomes evident in veterans' use of (or inability to use) post-WWII GI bill entitlements. I argue that the middlebrow, the military, literary consumer habits, and the American Dream coalesce to form the basic building blocks of

[61] I rely here on a significant body of scholarship demonstrating the rise of the military masculine figure in the American imagination during WWII. See especially Christina Jarvis's *The Male Body at War*

[62] The freedom to spend was used by politicians like Richard Nixon to contrast the wealth and freedoms of the United States with the perceived lack of personal freedom symbolized by the Soviet Union, and encouraged by pieces of legislation, including several of the "American Dream Act(s)."

the "American Way of Life," which the post-WWII GI bill education and housing entitlements purport to make possible.

Introduction

In the Council on Books in Wartime's 1942 roundtable, "Books are Weapons in the War of Ideas," several speakers noted that the problem of the war is not the war itself, but rather the transition back to civilian life afterwards. This awareness motivated the council to select books which were aimed not just to entertain servicemembers, but to encourage and inspire them to look forward to a better America when they returned. Lawmakers at home similarly anticipated the challenges of servicemembers' adjustment from wartime to "normal" civilian society, and drafted several pieces of legislation, including the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, in anticipation of the challenges of peacetime. As I argued in the introduction, the post-WWII GI Bill education and housing benefits significantly impacted the establishment of the American Dream as we understand it today—that is, as a "dream" with a particular imagery attached to it. I also argue that the GI Bill and the Armed Services Editions work together to cohere this Dream; that is because what the Armed Services Editions as a body of texts imagine as possible, the GI Bill makes economically feasible. Although pieces of the American Dream are identifiable in different periods in U.S. history, these coalesced in the postwar years with the help of veteran and active duty servicemember entitlements, two of which I analyze extensively in this chapter. One of the major ways in which the middlebrow is established as a dominant popular culture in the U.S. is by training GIs and making certain commodities more available to them, including (as I argue in this chapter) education and suburban home ownership[63]. The mythology of the

[63] I refer most often to *home ownership* although "ownership" is not essential—rather, occupying a suburban home, if done convincingly enough, can also fulfill this cultural aspect of the American Dream. I will discuss the tension between home ownership and renting in greater depth in Part III of this chapter.

American Dream is never more tangible than in times of economic prosperity, and servicemembers began returning home to just that.

As WWII wound down and the Cold War loomed ahead, the American Dream became synonymous with a consumer-driven middle-class lifestyle, which more people were attaining than ever before, and which increasingly came to include particular images of home life and degree attainment. Historian Roger L. Geiger connects rising enrollments to an expanded postwar prosperity mindset. In the 1950s, "average" Americans enjoyed "increasingly abundant and affordable material goods," which evidenced for them the obvious prosperity of the American Way of Life (Geiger 41). The boom in postwar enrollment in higher education is often attributed to the post-WWII GI Bill—first known as the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944—which promised free college tuition to all servicemembers who served at least 96 consecutive days, as well as a zero-percent down payment home loan and other attractive benefits. Along with the GI bill's zero-percent down payment clause, in 1946 the Veterans Emergency Housing Program (VEHP) financed the construction of thousands of homes for rent and purchase, *for veterans only*. While home ownership had long been a dream for many Americans, particularly immigrants and working-class families, the specific dwelling which comes to *represent* the hopes of home ownership—security, dependability, safety—signifies an important change in the construction of the American Dream. As Dianne Harris and other architectural historians, economists, and cultural critics argue, the suburban home plays a key role in identity formation, from its architecture, to location, to the items on display within the home[64].

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[64] See Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses,* 15; See also David Roediger, David Delaney, Audrey Kobayashi, Linda Peake, Laura Pulido, Richard Schein, Owen Dwyer, Laura Barraclough, James Duncan, David Lambert, and Nancy Duncan for more on this topic.

In the postwar era, the immense expansion of suburban communities, as well as the imagery disseminated about suburban life, cement the private, single-family home on its own lot firmly within the imagery of the American Dream. While the home may seem an obvious facet of the Dream, education may not come so readily to mind. However, higher education begins to play a key role in the formation of the American Dream in the postwar era. The "American way of life," as Geiger refers to it, came to include higher education in the postwar era, after college admissions significantly expanded due to the GI Bill[65], as well as home ownership. As the middle class rapidly grew in the postwar years, so too did college enrollments. While Geiger simplifies this expansion somewhat, I engage him along with other scholars to demonstrate the social foundation on which the 1950s American Dream began to take shape in the postwar years—which, as I will argue in depth in this chapter of the dissertation, is demonstrated through changes in higher education and housing practices. Along with occupying a suburban home, "For middle-class Americans, new or old," Geiger suggests, "nothing exemplified the American way of life better than sending sons and daughters to college" (Geiger 44). While this qualification—*better*—is debatable, college education and homeownership seemed to be requisite achievements of the comfortably middle-class in the postwar era. In this period, the U.S. situated itself more firmly than ever as a staunchly middlebrow culture, even as critics convinced of its feminizing effects attempted to vehemently oppose middlebrow influence.

In this chapter, I argue that returning GIs not only boosted enrollment in universities across the country, but also contributed to and fundamentally changed the culture of U.S. higher

[65] Geiger notes that, "The more selective colleges opened enrollments significantly after the war in response to the GIs, anti-discriminatory legislation (enacted or threatened), and a democratic spirit. However, from the mid-fifties through the early sixties, there was little advance in social inclusion. The rising qualifications of applicants gave admissions officers the best of all worlds—more applicants, better applicants, and the preservation of preferences" (Geiger, 70).

education through their experience in wartime[66]. Similarly, the movement from the city to the suburbs, strongly encouraged by the GI bill, prompted further anxiety about American masculinity as contemporary critics "saw the suburbs as emasculating given their enshrinement of domesticity, especially of the nuclear family" amid heightened Cold War nationalism (Poole 475). While the Armed Services Editions themselves did not necessarily encourage movement to the suburbs, I argue that the ASEs in conjunction with the Education Benefits and Housing Benefits helped to cohere the American Dream of the 1950s as a collection of material objects possessed by an idealized, heteronormative family by enabling a significant portion of the population to act on the middlebrow instinct to buy and have what everyone else was buying and having. Thus, where Chapter 1 explains the impact of the ASEs on the establishment of the American Dream, this chapter will focus explicitly on the impact of policy and advertising on the construction of an iconography and lexicon of the American Dream. I will first discuss the basic provisions of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, hereafter referred to as the post-WWII GI bill, and later will close-read parts of the bill, contemporary academic discourse in *The Journal of Higher Education* and *The Journal of General Education*, and finally, images of the American Dream in advertising.

a. Methodologies

My methodologies in Part II (Education) and Part III (Housing) of this chapter are vastly different, but in ways that are important to the field of American Literature studies. My

[66] In a future project, I hope to expand on how, in my interpretation of curricula in addition to the contemporary debates in the academic journals discussed in this chapter, the G.I.s changed classroom culture in addition to campus culture. I extrapolate based on my research that the particular kind of reading public created by as well as the knowledge gained through their consumption of the Armed Services Editions contribute to the change in classroom culture in this period. In this dissertation, the ASEs are explained and analyzed in greater detail in the introduction and Chapter 1. In Chapter 1, I argue that because titles included in the ASE project were so varied, it is necessary to examine the gendered anxiety that arose from critics of this readership, who, even after the war, were concerned about the effeminizing effect of some of these titles on the purported hallmarks of military masculinity.

discussions of both the Education and Housing provisions of the GI bill necessarily employ critical whiteness studies. Critical whiteness studies interrogates white identity and the development of white privilege as ideologically, socially, and legally maintained. As Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe[67] observe, critical whiteness studies, like broader critical race studies "takes its name from its function," namely, to "critique race and whiteness as they play out, paradoxically through visibility and invisibility, in US [sic] culture" (Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe, 361). Because, as Jennifer Beech[68] argues, critical whiteness studies is necessarily interdisciplinary, my methodologies in this chapter appropriate techniques from the fields of history, sociology, and economics in my analysis of policy and advertisements. Demographic statistics about veterans' use of GI bill education provisions or housing benefits, for example, while essential to my argument in this chapter, are difficult to situate within literary studies because of the fundamental differences between economic and literary analyses, but this chapter seeks to adapt methods from both fields in an effort to accurately measure the GI bill's effect on the American Dream.

My analysis of the Education provisions of the G.I. bill examines not only the G.I. bill as policy, but the academic discourse surrounding anxieties about the presence of G.I.s on campus as well. Thus, my analysis in this section adopts methods typically associated with historical criticism rather than literary theory—but while these kinds of documents and this method of analysis are not usually applied in literary studies, it is important to examine these documents through a historical lens in order to understand how the Education provisions of the GI bill contribute to the construction of the American Dream along with the ASEs, Housing provisions

[67] Kennedy, Tammie M., Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliff. "The Matter of Whiteness: Or, Why Whiteness is Important to Rhetoric and Composition Studies," *Rhetoric Review* 24.4 (2005).
[68] *White Out: A Guidebook for Teaching and Engaging with Critical Whiteness Studies*

of the GI bill, and the particulars of middlebrow literature discussed in Chapter 3. In Part III, I focus the combination of policy (again using the GI bill provisions) and advertising as part of the iconography which constructs both the *idea* and the *image* of the American Dream. As advertisements in women's and shelter magazines such as *Better Homes & Gardens* and *Lifestyle* demonstrate, in the postwar U.S., middle-class status required more than a certain income, but rather was evidenced by a particular image of personal and family living. A middle-class lifestyle became synonymous with the Levittown-style home (a kitchen, a living room, three bedrooms, and a bathroom, with a yard enclosed by a white picket fence) in the suburban housing landscape, a young, college-educated breadwinner, his young, (often) college-educated wife, and their children. In essence, "the growing prosperity of American society boosted social demand for higher education," and it soon became part and parcel of the middlebrow American Dream (Geiger 44). While there is ample scholarship on the GI bill, the middlebrow, the role of the suburban home in the achievement middle-class status, and the impact of GIs on higher education, these topics have not been sufficiently linked. While scholars such as architectural historian Dianne Harris have discussed the significance of the images of homes in advertisements of the period as well as the relationship between interior design and class, the analysis of these images does not explicitly connect to a concept of the cultural power of the middlebrow in this period; Similarly, while others like American literary critics Sarah Churchwell and Faye Hammill, discussed further in Chapter 3, note the fundamental importance of magazine culture for the middlebrow, their scholarship focuses on the 1920s and thus does not postulate the relationship between the middlebrow home of the postwar era with that particular magazine culture. In this chapter, I seek to bridge those gaps to clearly demonstrate the

interconnectedness between the GI bill, the middlebrow, higher education, and the suburban home in the construction of the American Dream in the postwar period.

In this chapter, I discuss two GI bill entitlements in particular—Education benefits and Housing benefits—but do not discuss in detail the other entitlements promised by the bill. Although other benefits, such as healthcare, are significant and also have the potential to affect one's economic and class standings, the Education and Housing entitlements make clear the cultural shift toward a middlebrow culture with an emphasis on the *continual production of consumers* through a variety of cultural instruments including media. I focus in particular on education and housing to demonstrate how these entitlements present the possibility of achieving a particular kind of middle-class lifestyle in the U.S., but one that is in truth only easily attainable by a select group (white men from a middleclass background). As is evident in the tension between the purported goals of the GI bill and the ultimate uneven application of its entitlements, the colorblind legal apparatus is particularly good at ignoring (and at times furthering) hundreds of years of racial disenfranchisement. While the focus of this chapter lies primarily in discussions of gender, the racial inequality evident in and perpetuated by the uneven application of post-WWII GI bill entitlements cannot be overlooked. The civic, legal, and social obstacles facing people of color trying to participate in this American Way are not incidental, but rather, as Jodi Melamed argues, are boundaries carefully constructed in the postwar period, by which white supremacist and neoliberal capitalist structures are continually maintained via a "new racism [which] deploys economic, ideological, cultural, and religious distinctions to produce lesser personhoods, laying these new categories of privilege and stigma across conventional racial categories, fracturing them into differential status groups" (14). Melamed argues that racial liberalism becomes dominant in the U.S. beginning in the postwar period. The primary sources I

analyze demonstrate that more overt racism persists in spite of the adoption of neoliberal, multicultural attitudes and language. However, as Melamed argues, this period sets in motion a series of formal and informal mechanisms by which exclusionary structures are maintained and perpetuated above overt reproach. Like the Patriot Act Melamed analyzes, the post-WWII GI bill suffers from "an overabiding sense of language disorder," in which "a language of antiracism[69] continually produces its opposite without being held accountable," such that racism is officially reframed as "always disappearing" (19).

I have also suggested in the introduction as well as in Chapter 1 that the Armed Services Editions greatly impacted the wider American reading public in the post-war era. Despite critic Gordon Hutner's generalized assertion that, beginning in the 1950s, "the widespread watching of TV detached us from preceding generations" and harkened in "a postliterate age, one of irreversible decline in the general reading tastes, one that transfigured, even eroded, conventional literary values," I argue that the possession and reading of books remains a significant part of middle-class, middlebrow identity in the postwar era, albeit in perhaps unexpected ways (196)[70]. Anxieties about "postliteracy," like anxieties about both over- and under- consumption of literary material during the war, demonstrate a highly gendered cultural discomfort and desire to firmly define the masculine in contrast to feminine behaviors. As argued in Chapter 1, this gendered anxiety is firmly rooted in WWII and Cold War concerns about national ability and virility in war. To demonstrate the widespread permeation of these particular anxieties in popular culture of the time, I will briefly examine magazine culture and advertising[71]. The inherently middlebrow

[69] "Anti-racism" is an anachronistic term in the case of the post-WWII GI bill, but is illustrative here nonetheless. While the GI bill, in contrast to the Patriot Act, does not employ the language of antiracism, its promise that "anyone" who has fulfilled service obligations is eligible for benefits engages in similarly unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) promises as those of overtly antiracist language.

[70] See Hutner, *What America Read*

[71] As discussed throughout the dissertation, magazine culture and advertising are essential hallmarks of middlebrow culture.

vision of the American Dream immortalized in this period demonstrates the way in which the middlebrow (with intimate ties to consumerism and thus to capitalism) is one of many inherently exclusionary cultural ideologies promoted by the state via direct, legal apparatuses and indirect, informal media such as magazine advertising alike. I argue that these military servicemember entitlements and academic shifts, together with Cold War anxieties about gender, sexuality, and the family, work together to produce the potent and enduring image of the American Dream as envisioned in the 1950s.

I. "An Open Invitation to the American Dream": An Overview of the post-WWII GI Bill Education and Housing Benefits

> For the first time, all the veteran sons and daughters of all the people will be economically able to go to college.
>
> -Roger M. Shaw (1947)

> Banks and mortgage agencies refuse loans to Negroes, thus making the GI Bill ineffective. Restrictive covenants confine Negroes to the worst slum areas in the nation.
>
> -Howard Johnson (1947)

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 is widely recognized as the most expansive and comprehensive GI bill offered to returning veterans in U.S. history[72]—one of the many reasons it is considered a turning point in U.S. housing and education policy as well as civil rights[73]. Facing inaction by Congress, which was reluctant to allocate federal funds to demobilization efforts, the American Legion pushed for legislation for veterans and significantly rewrote—and nicknamed—the Roosevelt's original Serviceman's Readjustment Act,

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[72] See Kasey Keeler, "Putting People Where They Belong: American Indian Housing Policy in the Mid-Twentieth Century"; Hilary Herbold, "Never a Level Playing Field: Blacks and the GI Bill"; Marcus Stanley, "College Education and the Midcentury GI Bills" (2003); David H. Onkst, "First a Negro… Incidentally a Veteran': Black World War Two Veterans and the G.I. Bill of Rights in the Deep South, 1944-1948," *The Journal of Social History* 31.3 (Spring 1998).

[73] Herbold explains that "All together, 7.8 million servicemen and servicewomen were educated under the GI Bill after World War II," and that, "[g]iven the obstacles facing blacks in 1944, one must acknowledge that the GI Bill provided a more level playing field for blacks seeking education and a more dignified means of living than the almost perpendicular slope most American blacks had known since Reconstruction. But that is not saying very much" (104)

transforming it into the comprehensive and extensive G.I. "Bill of Rights" we are familiar with today[74]. Perhaps the most pervasive myth surrounding the post WWII GI bill is the anecdotal argument that the benefits extended the opportunity to attend college and purchase a home to veterans from working-class and minority families[75]. This myth is understandably rooted in the quite impressive statistics that float around about the era—approximately 16 million men[76] and 350,000 women served in the armed forces during WWII from 1940-1947; *everyone* who served a minimum of ninety consecutive days beginning on or after September 16th, 1940, and who was "discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable[77]," was eligible for GI bill benefits. Compared to pre-war enrollments of a total of 1.4 million students, in the first year after the war, college enrollments of veterans *alone* increased to one million, meaning that the entire student body was rapidly expanding, in large part due to the added presence of a large number of veteran-students[78]. The post-WWII GI bill established the first VA home loan program, which backed over 2.4 million home loans[79] and enabled some 8 million men and women to attend college with tuition remission and a living stipend over the course of the bill's eligibility period. Additionally, between 1944 and 1949, nearly 9 million veterans made use of the unemployment pay provision in the bill for some period of time. Although it is true that the post-WWII GI bill facilitated the education and homeownership of millions of former servicemembers, the $14.7 billion dollars in entitlements were not disbursed or acted upon

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[74] See Geiger, *American Higher Education since World War II*
[75] Herbold, who illustrates the difficulty Black veterans faced in attempting to make use of their education entitlements, perpetuates this myth even in passing: "The GI Bill afforded a generation of working-class Americans an unprecedented opportunity to earn a college degree, and served for many as a lever into economic security" (106).
[76] Almost one-third of all U.S. American men served in the military in WWII in some capacity.
[77] Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, Part VIII. Found in Public Laws—CHS 266, 268—June 20, 22, 1944 (p. 284). Digital access provided by the Library of Congress digital archives.
[78] See Geiger, *American Higher Education since World War II*
[79] Data courtesy of Veteran's Affairs "History and Timeline- Education and Training" archive. Benefits.va.gov

equally. While all servicemen and women with more than ninety days of service were eligible, a significant number of them—particularly women, nonwhite veterans, and those from working-class families—were largely unable to make use of their GI bill entitlements.

The modes of excluding nonwhite veterans from making use of their G.I. bill Education and Housing benefits operated in similar ways, though each had additional exclusionary measures. It is helpful then to discuss some of the basic ways in which nonwhite veterans were prevented from using *both* kinds of GI bill provisions. While it is difficult to interpret data on post war GI bill use in higher education because of its sheer size and variance, Marcus Stanley suggests in his 2003 study of the Midcentury GI Bills that the best way to make sense of it is by discussing birth cohorts (or groups born within a set number of years) of white servicemen who could reasonably be expected to return to college after the war. Servicemembers in WWII had higher literacy rates than in previous wars[80], and could thus more reasonably be expected take advantage of the education benefits of the G.I. Bill. Additionally, nearly "70 percent of all men who turned 21 between 1940 and 1955 were *guaranteed an essentially free college education* plus a substantial stipend under one of the two GI Bills[81]"; additionally, "some 18 percent of the *total* stock of college-educated males in the United States could claim that their college education had been financed by a GI Bill subsidy" (Stanley 671, emphasis added). In his study, Stanley further simplifies his data by considering only white men. Yet, even within this more

[80] "In this war you have an army nearly 50 per cent high school graduates, or better" ("Books as Weapons in the War of Ideas, 1942; Colonel Greene, 38). See also the National Center for Education Statistics, which demonstrates a national increase in literacy from 92.3% in 1910 to 97.1% in 1940; it is important to note, however, that the NCES measures *actual* literacy (ability to read or write in any language), while we tend to think about and study *functional* literacy (one's ability to read or write sufficiently to function in society).

[81] What often complicates this discussion for economists and cultural theorists is that during this period there were in fact *two* GI bills—post-WWII, of course, and post-Korean War. Although this distinction is important, it does not add to my discussion, which seeks to identify the construction of the American Dream from the ASE project through the post-WWII GI bill benefits, many of which were similar to the post- Korean War GI bill benefits. Thus, the distinction is not wholly important in discussing college enrollment in particular during this period.

focused group, it is clear that the GI bill did not inherently increase the number of men from working-class families who attained a college degree. These are impressive numbers, but it is important to note that college enrollment had been steadily increasing since the 1910s (with a brief pause caused by economic hardship during the Great Depression). With this history in mind, Stanley stresses that "the question of whether this postwar educational growth reflects unusually rapid growth due to the GI bill depends almost entirely on what one estimates as the negative effect of WWII on education" (Stanley 677). Thus, the amalgamation of a string of correlative data points creates the illusion that all of these GI bill beneficiary populations are in fact the same.

Stanley's study is useful in its demonstration that even within a select group (white servicemen) who were more likely to be able to make use of their educational benefits than other cohorts (if only because they would not be turned away or discouraged from attending on the basis of race), the data still demonstrates that the GI bill did not significantly increase degree attainment for servicemen from working class backgrounds[82]. In fact, "men born among the bottom 45 percent of the SES distribution show essentially no unusual growth in higher education associated with the peak WWII GI bill period… [G]rowth in postsecondary education for the bottom two quintiles is more or less stagnant over the 1921-1926 birth cohorts, after showing fairly marked growth before it. Almost all of the considerable growth in postsecondary education during 1921-1926 occurs in the top half of the SES distribution" (Stanley 701). Geiger echoes Stanley's analysis, arguing that "social circumstances outweighed financial ones," and as

[82] Thus, Stanley's data further supports other scholars' conclusions that the GI bill did not necessarily make education more attainable for a more diverse population. It *did* encourage a significant cultural shift, however, which I will discuss further. As Peter F. Drucker noted in a 1992 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, "The GI Bill of Rights and the enthusiastic response to it on the part of America's veterans signaled the shift to a knowledge society. In this society, knowledge is the primary resource for individuals and for the economy overall."

a result, “enrollments in higher education,” including four-year colleges and universities, research institutions, and community colleges conferring associates degrees[83], “were heavily determined by the interaction of academic ability and family background,” which include race and class (Geiger 44). In short, “there is no evidence of an equalizing effect of the WWII GI bill on higher education across social classes,” even within the same racialized group (Stanley 710). Stanley’s discussion implies that the conception of the American Dream created during this time period is, insofar as college degree attainment is concerned, illusory. The *option* of “free” college education created the illusion that everyone who could possibly want to attend college *could*. Although this data makes clear that the GI bill education benefits did not fundamentally change the demographics of college enrollees, I will argue in this chapter that the GI bill entitlements, and the contemporaneous expansion of higher education, *did* significantly change the culture of higher education as well as the ways in which higher education and the middlebrow, middle class lifestyle, became more closely associated in the postwar period.

Similarly, the housing provisions of the GI bill made homeownership more attainable than at any other time in U.S. history—for, again, a select group. The rush to provide housing to servicemembers as the war began, coupled with the emergent postwar housing crisis (when an estimated 5 million new homes were needed) produced an ideal market for builders interested in creating planned communities.

The uneven distribution of entitlements and benefits was due in large part to the wording of the legislation itself. Those who wrote and sponsored the bill were very familiar with laws

[83] It is important to note here that “colleges” and “universities” were considered distinct institutions in higher education at this point in time, with “university” typically referring to research universities, but always designating membership to the exclusive Association of American Universities (AAU). Designation as a “university” also required that the institution in question awarded doctoral degrees in several subjects. See Chapter 2 of Geiger’s *American Higher Education After World War II* for an in-depth discussion and analysis of the expansion of universities versus colleges in the postwar era.

which would prevent certain populations from making use of their entitlements, even if the bill itself purported to guarantee privileges to all qualifying servicemembers. Congressman John Rankin, a Democrat from Mississippi and a pro-segregationist, insisted that the entitlements in the bill be enacted by the states rather than the federal government. Rankin feared that Black veterans would believe that their wartime contributions would "lift him through 4,000 years of education and development, make him the peer of the white man, and place him on terms of social and political equality with the members of the Caucasian race," and so was motivated to ensure that Black veterans returned to servile positions after the war (Rankin, qtd in Herbold 1994, p.104). Senator Joel Bennett Clark, the First National Commander of the American Legion and a fierce conservative from Missouri who vehemently opposed to Roosevelt's progressive New Deal legislation, co-sponsored the bill in the Senate and took responsibility for pushing the legislation through. The bill's sponsorship by fiercely segregationist politicians demonstrates that although the GI bill itself guarantees unobstructed educational, medical, and housing benefits to all eligible veterans, its authors recognized that veterans of color would have to contend with the segregated reality of the U.S. in this period, and so sought to obstruct their *use* of these benefits, rather than deny them benefits *in the language of the bill itself*.

In fact, although the language of the GI bill does not explicitly articulate racially discriminatory policy, it is important to understand the document in terms of the racially and economically segregated culture in which the bill was enacted. The Veterans' Administration (VA), the agency in charge of disbursing and approving veterans' entitlements, was itself made up of almost exclusively white men.[84] Similarly, other Veterans' institutions such as the

[84] See Hilary Herbold, "Never a Level Playing Field: Blacks and the GI Bill," p. 106 (1994-5); and Howard Johnson, "The Negro Veteran Fights for Freedom!" *Political Affairs*, (May 1947) p 430. Economist Howard Johnson noted in his 1947 survey of the VA that "of 1,700 veterans employed in the Veteran's Administration in one southern state, only seven are Negroes" (Johnson 430).

American Legion and VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) "endorse and encourage segregation and discrimination against Negro Veterans" (Johnson 430). Furthermore, the "Veteran's Administration in 1946 refused accreditation to the newly formed United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, the only agency formed expressly to assist [B]lack veterans at the time" and in 1947, "the American Legion granted five of its state offices permission to charter posts for African-American servicemen—but only if they were segregated" (Herbold 106). While not segregationist in principle, the VA was flanked by the "avowedly segregated American Legion and the VFW," and the only recourse against discrimination for Black veterans was the support of the NAACP (Herbold 106).

Thus, although all servicemembers who met terms of duty requirements were entitled to the benefits of the GI bill, discriminatory institutions could still prevent them from making use of these entitlements[85]. While Black veterans may have received approval to use their education benefits, attendance at white colleges and universities was still extremely rare. Contemporary critics of the influx of veteran-students on predominantly white college campuses, for example, offered thinly-veiled racism and classism as reason enough to dissuade students from employing their benefits. One such critic, Roger M. Shaw[86], expresses almost hysteric concern about the impact of the surge of veteran presence on college campuses in his 1947 article in *The Journal of Higher Education*. He laments that this population may turn "every Alma Mater in the country" into "hopeless educational hobo jungles," concerns which are emphasized in his subsequent rhetorical questions: "Will the bread lines form at the bursar's window? Will it be custody instead of culture in the academic halls?" (Shaw 19). The combination of overcrowding in

[85] In other words, this means that institutions of higher education, or the banks approving mortgages for the use of GI bill housing benefits, were able to turn away qualifying veterans on the basis of another identity category.
[86] Shaw's fears will be further analyzed later in the chapter, particularly because they offer insight into the racialized, gendered and class-based concerns with democratizing higher education.

Historically Black Colleges and the segregationist practices at other colleges and universities meant that most Black veterans were unable to make use of their educational benefits, let alone their housing benefits, which were virtually null within the context of restrictive housing covenants[87].

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 broadened and reinforced growing problems between different racial and economic groups in the United States, including wealth disparity, education attainment, and civil rights, simultaneously promoting and revealing the illusory nature of the American Dream[88]. While for some, the GI bill made more affordable and more attainable a specific version of the American Dream, that opportunity was both promised to and denied for others. The "GI Bill of Rights" did not protect Black veterans from the segregationist laws excluding them from select colleges and universities, or suburban neighborhoods like Levittown—even *if* they had managed to secure a mortgage despite what were often impossible odds at most banks and lending institutions. Similarly, women veterans were unable to legally obtain a mortgage, loan, or charge account without a male relative cosigner until President Gerald Ford signed the Federal Consumer Credit Act of 1974—meaning women veterans were unable to act on their GI bill and VA mortgage benefits—*thirty years* after the post-WWII GI bill promised these entitlements to "all" servicemembers. This is not to say that *no* women or nonwhite veterans were able to take advantage of these entitlements, only that certain veterans—especially Black and Native American veterans[89] —faced additional barriers.

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[87] See David R. Francis, "Black Wealth Hit by Racial Heritage," *Christian Science Monitor*, (April 6, 1990) and Howard Johnson (1947); Only one-fifth of all Black veterans who were eligible for and sought to use their educational benefits were able to actually register in colleges and universities. For more about this, see Herbold, p107

[88] While this is indeed a sweeping statement, I refer here to a wealth of scholars in economics, cultural studies, history, and literature (including those already referenced explicitly in this chapter).

[89] I will discuss the particular barriers to access for Native American veterans later in the chapter. Keeler begins his article with the story of Jerry Flute, "a tribally enrolled community member at the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation in South Dakota," who wanted to use his GI bill benefits to attend college, but was subjected to a number of

It is essential to understand the social and civil restrictions imposed on veterans in order to understand the GI bill's implementation and the lasting image of American life and the American Dream which that disparity consequentially produced.

The following two sections will examine the impacts of the Education Benefits and Housing Benefits separately. While the GI bill may not have significantly increased the number of working class and students of color enrolled at colleges and universities, it had an undeniable impact on the culture and practices of higher education across the United States. Similarly, the GI bill enabled a vast expansion of suburban housing projects and facilitated, in some areas, "white flight" from urban centers to the suburbs—a movement which promoted the idea of suburban homeownership as representative of having achieved securely middle-class status. As I have argued throughout the dissertation, the American Dream is one of constant invention and is thus inherently illusory, meaning its "promise" does not have to be true to be alluring[90].

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bureaucratic stumbling blocks (70). Although Flute initially "briefly drew on Operation Boot Strap, an education benefit program available to GIs, to attend college classes, [he] withdrew from school before he earned his degree," and struggled to regain access to higher education through the VA after this first attempt (70).

[90] Refer to the introduction, where this legislation is discussed further. I refer here to the various "American Dream" Acts, from 1977 to 2021. The repeated inclusion of economic, domestic, and academic imagery in legislation including "American Dream" in their titles demonstrates the lasting legacy of this particular vision of the American Dream, and supports the stakes of my argument.

II. GIs in the Classroom: The Impact of the Education Benefits on American Culture and Higher Education

> These veterans will present a new personnel phenomenon in higher education. They will be more completely unselected, 'unscreened,' as the services would have it, than any group that every before found its way to college. The selective factors of tuition, incidental fees, books, supplies, and subsistence will no longer operate to keep out the economically unblessed. Social and personal backgrounds of the student veterans may be expected to vary from primeval to gold-coast. Individual differences in such spheres as motivation will be greater than ever before. For the first time, all the veteran sons and daughters of all the people will be economically able to go to college.
>
> Roger M. Shaw (1947)

> Colleges and universities can meet the challenge the veteran offers as an opportunity to make higher education in America stand for the best in civilian life, yes, something worth waiting and fighting for.
>
> Edward McDonagh (1945)

The decade 1940-1950 marks a definitive moment in the history of higher education, especially notable in its slow evolution towards a democratized system, not insignificantly influenced by the influx of veteran students with the help of the GI bill. Although many economics scholars argue that the importance of the post- WWII GI bill is over-stated[91], its impact on the culture of higher education in the U.S. cannot be denied[92]. The Education Benefits provided by the GI bill not only influenced the American higher education system by sending one population to school in greater numbers than ever before, but also financially bolstered the institution by effectively funding the depleted academy with Federal dollars. Because of the significant decline in enrollments during and after the Great Depression, as well as a faculty retention crisis during the war[93], colleges and universities[94] struggled to accommodate the influx

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[91] See Stanley, Keeler, Herbold, and Geiger.

[92] This is evidenced, for example, in the sheer number of articles published between 1944-1949 in *The Journal of Higher Education* and *The Journal of General Education* which expressed anxiety about the new "veteran-student" descending on college campuses at the close of the war.

[93] See Ralph C. Flynt, "Postwar College Courses" (1945), Curtis E. Avery, "Veteran's Education in the Universities" (1946), and Edward McDonagh "Veterans Challenge Higher Education" (1947)

[94] In this period, "college" and "university" denoted different kinds of institutions—"college" refers to what we consider a liberal arts college today, while the title of "university" was typically reserved for research universities where doctoral degrees were conferred. Until the 1960s, the title "university" was reserved for institutions included in the Association of American Universities (AAU). Although trade schools were strongly encouraged during and

of students as the war wound down. While at first glance, it seems that the immense increase in enrollments can be credited to the GI bill for enabling veterans to attend college, it is important to keep in mind that matriculating classes included veterans, those who had left or delayed school to work in war industries, and new high school graduates, among others. Debates in *The Journal of Education* and *The Journal of General Education* (discussed further in this chapter) as well as historical analysis of higher education in the period[95] demonstrate that, as the definition of the "traditional student" became more dubious, the culture of higher education began to shift dramatically.

Colleges and universities, often seen as exclusive, exclusionary, and prestigious, helped to create, maintain, or improve one's socioeconomic status or appearance of class status. At the same time, the federal funding provided by the GI bill, and later by federally-incentivized research projects, enabled universities to recuperate wartime financial losses, regain prewar enrollments, and even expand. I argue that the shifts in campus culture at this time demonstrate a significant movement towards a democratized, middlebrow conception of the place of education in U.S. society. Where higher education had previously been an exclusive opportunity, colleges and universities began expanding their enrolments; where students had had little say in their educational and cultural experience, colleges and universities were forced to begin taking students' experience into account and making significant institutional, administrative, and infrastructural adjustments; where college and university attendance had been marked by a largely self-guided 'pursuit of knowledge,' scholars began debating the concept of a set of

shortly following WWII, and many veterans used their GI bill benefits there, in this chapter, I focus on enrollments in colleges and universities, primarily to examine the ways in which the presence of veterans on more exclusive college campuses began to change the face of higher education and the academy as well as the place of higher education in the American imagination.

[95] See Geiger.

'general education' courses, which would establish a common foundation for students across disciplines. Between 1944 and 1945 alone, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 was passed, *The Journal of General Education* was launched, and the Harvard Committee's report on *General Education in a Free Society* was published. Cultural shifts in the conversation around education over the course of the decade essentially forced institutions of higher education to face—and in some ways, cater to—the masses. As the demand for higher education grew and attendance became an increasingly common aspect of the middle-class lifestyle, what it meant to 'go to college' began to change. In the post-war years, the student population was becoming more heterogenous in terms of age and life experience, and colleges and universities were also undergoing major cultural shifts. Admissions committees began searching for the highest echelon of student, motivated both by the wealth of applicants from which to choose from and by, in the cases of more exclusive colleges and universities, ivory-tower elitism. With the struggle to define the 'essence of a liberal education' and the allure of expanding the university's 'physical assets,' middlebrow culture slowly but surely found its way into the academy[96]. In many ways, one can read the debates over General Education in this period as a kind of formal training in middlebrow taste, where college students learn an appreciation of middlebrow culture, sentiment, and aesthetics. In short, in this decade the middlebrow and the academy converge.

The convergence of the middlebrow and the academy signifies more than an infiltration of middlebrow sentiment in higher education. Rather, it also signifies the impact of a greater demand for higher education on (and by) the middle class, largely influenced by the interests of returning servicemembers. In the postwar climate, a college education—distinct from degree

[96] See McDonagh (1947, p.152) who laments that 'physical assets, buildings, and grounds on a campus seem to strike the eye of presidents and trustees more than securing competent faculty members.' This greed is evidence to McDonagh that 'Materialism has invaded the college campus too.'

attainment—became in some ways a commodity much like other middlebrow commodities, and thus evidenced the growing prosperity of the middle class as well as a cohesive vision of the American Dream as solidly middle-class. The ability to attend and send one's children to college was for many a status symbol more than an economic necessity. In fact, the degree was only marginally useful in terms of wage earnings considering that, "given the booming demand for industrial labor, the wage premium—the difference in earnings of college versus high school graduates—in 1950 was the lowest in the century, and in 1960 it was barely higher" (Geiger 41-2). As the demand for higher education grew and attendance became an increasingly common aspect of the middle-class lifestyle, what it meant to "go to college" began to change. In the postwar years, the student population was becoming more heterogenous in terms of age and life experience, and colleges and universities were also undergoing major cultural shifts. Admissions committees began searching for the highest echelon of student, motivated both by the wealth of applicants from which to choose from and by, in the cases of more exclusive colleges and universities, ivory-tower elitism. Geiger notes that for the wider academic community, "Two paramount issues loomed on the horizon, one pointing toward tradition and the other toward possible change. After the turmoil of the war years, institutions felt a powerful impulse not to just return to their previous tasks but also to define themselves and their essential mission. Above all, this meant identifying and articulating the essence of liberal education" (XI). Two such products of this "intellectual ferment over the structure, purpose, and curricula of collegiate education" were the Harvard Committee report, *General Education in a Free Society* (also known as the Redbook) and the President's Commission on Higher Education (3). With the struggle to define the "essence of a liberal education" and the allure of expanding the university's "physical assets," middlebrow culture slowly but surely found its way into the

academy[97]. These are best understood in three broad categories: culture, material, and curriculum[98].

a. The "GI Way": Cultural Shifts in the Academy

The changing climate of postwar America initiated a number of shifts in the educational sector. These shifts influence both the place of higher education in the American imagination and the culture of the universities themselves—which I consider an important academic *shift toward the middlebrow*. Many of the exclusive colleges and universities expanded enrollments significantly after the war in response to returning GIs, and while this increased demand for college education allowed institutions the opportunity to be more selective of their students, it did not necessarily make student bodies more diverse. In fact, the financial impact of this demand actually had the opposite effect by allowing selective private colleges a wider pool from which to select the 'best,' most academically attractive students[99]. Where private schools were often able to match institutional spending with generous donations from alumni and benefactors, less selective schools did not have the same resources and thus more often attracted 'average' students. With an increased pool of qualified applicants, admissions committees sought to recruit the "best and brightest," following similar recruiting logic to the special groups within the U.S. military. While universities assumed that all of the "best and brightest" were included in their

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[97] See McDonagh, who laments that "physical assets, buildings, and grounds on a campus seem to strike the eye of presidents and trustees more than securing competent faculty members" (152). This greed is evidence to McDonagh that "Materialism has invaded the college campus too" (152).
[98] These three categories will be discussed together, rather than in separate sub-sections. By culture, I refer to the attitudes of administration, faculty, and students (whether they complement or contradict). Material refers here to the tangible, physical assets which institutions began to acquire, including new buildings, resources, and monies (in the forms of federal funds and private donations). I take curriculum as self-explanatory, referring to the commonly accepted understanding of the term within the context of higher education.
[99] This stratification is even more dramatic when one takes into consideration HBCUs, as noted in the previous section. See Geiger, p.70-72

applicant pool, the data demonstrates the falsity of this assumption[100]. We know from the previous section that increased enrollments did not necessarily reflect a more diverse applicant pool in terms of race and class, but they *did* reflect a more diverse student body in terms of age and experience level—both of which had a notable effect on the culture of higher education.

Academics' attitudes toward this change were mixed and often heated, whether in favor of the increased veteran-student population or in resistance to it. Critics of the veteran-student population were often concerned that the influx of nontraditional students would change college and university culture "for the people for whom it was made," namely, the "docile" and young "traditional college student" (Shaw 21, Avery 361). Because these critiques took place largely in academic journals, the "threat" veteran-students posed to the college and university campus appeared more universal, but the actual influence of veteran-students on campuses were limited to those institutions approved for GI bill funding[101]. These institutions were, however, usually highly esteemed[102], and thus critics at the more elite or exclusive colleges and universities

[100] As Geiger notes, "the idea of reserving higher education for the top 25 or 32 percent was chimerical. One-fifth of that group did not graduate from high school, and only one-half of the rest went to college—40 percent. The odds of attending college were determined far more by social and cultural factors" (Geiger 43).
[101] Eckleberry sought to understand the bases of institutional approval, and "the bases indicated on the inquiry form" he designed "were: mere request by the institution, mere possession of a charter, written reports by the institution to the state department of education, inspection of staff and program in addition to plant and equipment, accreditment by a national or regional accrediting agency, and any other basis" (Eckleberry 122). He stresses that "The inquiry forms as checked indicate that the state departments of education have followed a variety of procedures in approving institutions… Of the 42 states which indicated the bases used for approval of colleges and universities, 23 indicated that only one of the bases mentioned in the form was used. Of the 23, one indicated that the mere request of the institution was the basis for approval; 6, that possession of a charter; 6, that inspection of plant, equipment, staff and program; 9, that accreditment by a national or regional agency, and 1, that another basis (approval by the state council of education) was the basis used. The remaining states used various combinations of these bases. In addition to the 9 which used accreditment as the sole basis of approval, 15 used it in combination with inspection or other bases. Thirty-four of the states used either accreditment or inspection of plant and program, or both" (Eckleberry 123). ; One of the major debates on this topic revolved around remedial education (for students whose education was interrupted and perhaps compromised by that time away) and general education. Because "remedial" and "general" education were often interchangeable, I will note remedial education only when it is referred to particularly and distinctly in criticism.
[102] See Eckleberry: "In the 43 states reporting, there are 692 colleges and universities listed in the [Educational] *Directory*[102] [of the United States Office of Education]; of these, 666 in 43 states have been approved under the 'G.I. Bill'; of those approved, 517 in 43 states are accredited by their respective associations of colleges and secondary

worried that the new veteran-student population would challenge longstanding collegiate traditions and culture.

While this newly increased population of nontraditional students impacted college culture, it was not to the detriment of the college experience or quality of education. In fact, married student-veterans (a newly increased population) achieved higher grades than single veterans, who in turn tended to perform better academically than traditional students[103]. Some believed that the combination of worldly experience and rigorous military instruction[104] would result in a more demanding student, but scholars disagreed on whether that would improve the university or damage the quality of university education. Shaw's insistence that "The colleges will not change fundamentally to meet the challenge of this horribly human group of new entrants to higher education" proved futile, as contemporaries like Avery and McDonagh foresaw (Shaw 20). Rather, colleges and universities adapted to the challenge the veteran-student population presented to "many of the sacred and accepted practices of college training" in ways that democratized traditionally exclusionary modes of instruction and shifted the focus from the pontificating professor to the student (McDonagh 149). This shift demonstrates a slow evolution in the power dynamics of higher education from immutable institution to student-as-consumer.

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schools; 7 in 4 states have been accredited by the American Association of Teachers Colleges; and 11 states have approved 21 institutions of this type which are not listed in the *Directory*" (Eckleberry 124) .

[103] See Geiger, p. 6

[104] Officer training, which often involved rigorous and effective instruction, is argued to have had a significant impact on veterans' expectations on entering colleges and universities after their terms of service, at least by contemporary critics. Shaw argues that the "G.I. Way… consists of bringing together a highly screened group of young persons; a motivation for learning that is often as vital as life and death, or at least promotion; good instruction; and ample apparatus for facilitating instruction" (19-20). Shaw argues that while this combination and type of efficiency has been the ideal, not many civilian, peacetime schools can "screen as ruthlessly, motivate poignantly, appropriate skilled teachers as autocratically, or commandeer the ultimate in teaching aids as extravagantly as can the administrators of the schools of the soldier" (20). See also McDonagh, "Veterans Challenge Higher Education" (1947), and Earl J. McGRath "Appraising the Veteran's Education: The Problems of Educational Institutions in Accrediting the Education Received in the Military Forces" (1944)

Perhaps the most notable and direct result of veteran-student influence—and the one evidencing the most middlebrow sentiment—is the change in systems of evaluation. Beginning in the mid-1940s, colleges and universities across the country began experimenting with general education and survey courses in the hopes of creating a solid foundation on which first-year students could continue their education, demonstrating the significant impact of veteran-student and middlebrow influence on higher education. As Shaw feared, the veteran-student would not be as easily molded as the traditional student, and thus presented real challenges to the model of higher education as it stood. Avery argued that because the veteran-student's "maturity and worldly experience is probably at least equal" to that of their instructors, "the veteran will, if he has his way, change education by demanding new ways of evaluating progress," which will be measurable "in terms of actual competency of knowledge" (Avery 362). Critics like McDonagh tested out the idea of *placement testing* (designed to assign returning or remedial students to the appropriate course level) in debates in *The Journal of Higher Education*, suggesting that there might be a way to consider knowledge the veteran-student gained during their tours of service as 'creditable' knowledge[105]. The idea that students might 'test out of' required courses (often those assumed to deter 'less-qualified' students from certain subjects) was new and disruptive in the postwar period, and disturbed traditionalists who believed that the direction of higher education must be left to the individual professors, rather than standardized and made easily navigable and consumable by students. The idea that one might "test into" or out of a given course, though tentatively suggested at the time, proved to be only one of the many lasting changes—and movements toward the middlebrow—in higher education. This new system unsettling to those

[105] Although he acknowledges that "Participation in this world war has not necessarily made veterans international-minded," McDonagh suggests that "If the veteran-student has the general informational background of a college Sophomore, perhaps he should enroll in college at this level," and "If the veteran-student knows the basic principles of Freshman English, there is little reason why he should take the course" (McDonagh 149, 152).

who, as Shaw put it, "hold high the torch and keep the fire burning brightly on their… scholastic altars" and "intone as usual the verbalisms pertinent to formal discipline, mental muscle, and faculty psychology," but worse still for these critics was the movement toward curricular change (Shaw 20). The Harvard committee report (also known as the Redbook), the President's Commission on Education, the General Education Movement, and the academic standardization these promoted both threatened the institutional freedom on which colleges and universities prided themselves and presented the potential of democratizing formerly elite culture and knowledges.

b. Material Challenges

Beyond the direct influence of veteran-students on campus culture, university expansion ushered in the more universally instrumental General Education Movement, which sought to expand higher education to create a better-informed citizenry less susceptible to propaganda as fears about communism mounted at the close of WWII. Three decades after former Harvard professor Charles W. Eliot's *Harvard Classics* caused an uproar, Harvard President James Bryant Conant sought to diffuse liberal education and adequately educate the "free society" of the United States. Conant purported to seek a "sufficient educational background for citizens of a free nation," and established the Harvard Committee for General Education in a Free society to determine this sufficient education[106](Conant vii). The committee proposed a series of "General Education" courses, which sought to link the humanities and hard sciences by creating a set of

[106] The committee's findings were later published as *General Education in a Free Society*, also known as the "Redbook". The Committee was constituted as follows: Paul H. Buck (chairman), Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences; John H. Finley, Jr. (vice-chairman), Greek; Raphael Demos, Philosophy; Leigh Hoadly, Zoology, Associate Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences; Byron S. Hollinshead, Education; Wilbur K. Jordan, History; Ivor A. Richards, Director of the Commission on English Language Studies; Phillip J. Rulon, Education, Acting Dean of the Graduate School of Education; Arthur M. Schlesinger, History; Robert Ulich, Education, former Minister of Education in Saxony, Germany; George Wald, Biology; Benjamin F. Wright, Government, Department Chair.

required courses which students specializing in either field would take in common. In just the second volume of the *Journal of Education* critic Paul F. Roach observed that the demand for practical knowledge demonstrated by "the present generation of students" demonstrated the "*increasingly widespread belief that the attainment of the objectives so highly valued in our culture depends on the prompt acceptance of a larger measure of democracy in all aspects of society*" (Roach 248-49, italics original). Like Roach, Conant suggests that "what is new" in postwar academic culture is the push for "a system of *universal* education," demonstrating through his analysis that a middlebrow sensibility has come to outweigh the exclusionary academic practices of the elite (ix, emphasis added). The intention of the report, and Conant's emphasis on a general education, created significant tension in the academic community[107].

While the Harvard report was heavily criticized by some, it demonstrates both in its specific recommendations and its circulation as a print culture object that middlebrow values of accessibility, mass-production, and social education were trickling upward into the previously exclusive academic elite. Where formal "'book learning'" had been "the possession of a professional class" whose "restricted nature of the circle possessing certain linguistic and historical knowledge greatly enhanced the prestige of this knowledge," the changing social atmosphere has created a desire for more democratic production and dissemination of knowledge and a distinctly middlebrow appreciation of it (ix). In 1945, the report asked: "How can general education be so adapted to different ages and, above all, to different abilities and interests, that it

[107] On the one hand, the report's careful recommendation that a Great Books course might include a handful of the "best" authors, which "might include Homer, one or two of the Greek tragedies, Plato, the Bible, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Tolstoy" seems to suggest a desire for more uniformity in canon (207). On the other hand, the committee concedes that "In practice the choice of texts is embarrassed by many considerations, some administrative: admission to approved lists, library limitations, lack of suitable editions," and educators' level of comfort in teaching a given text, all of which suggest that education will necessarily include some inherent variety (115).

can appeal deeply to each, yet remain in goal and essential teaching the same for all?"[108] Where previously, "'Good taste' could be standardized in each generation by those who knew," Conant argues that "today, we are concerned with a general education—a liberal education—not for the relatively few, but for a multitude" (ix). Thus, the "problem" of teaching students of varying ability and with different degrees of college preparation is extended beyond the example of the veteran-student, although critics like Shaw preferred to believe otherwise. Rather, the presence of GIs on college and university campuses served to heighten the urgency of a democratic education for the broader U.S. community.

In addition to cultural changes, infrastructural challenges caused concern among academics and administrators alike. Academic journals at the time demonstrated concern over the ability of colleges and universities to meet the logistical requirements of educating an increased student population. Challenges included the rapid material expansion necessitated by the growth of matriculating classes, the postwar faculty shortage, and finally, the rush for federal funding at research universities. "As the war emergency ends," one critic laments, "the faculty emergency begins in higher education," referring to the troubling combination of mass faculty retirement[109], low enrollment and matriculation of graduate students, and increased undergraduate enrollments (McDonagh 152). Funding was also a significant contributing factor to the "faculty emergency" to which McDonagh refers[110]. At those schools struggling to balance a shortage of faculty with the throng of incoming students, developing creative labor solutions was essential, but proved both challenging and problematic. At some universities, this meant

[108] *General Education in a Free Society* (1945), cited under "Educational Theory" (51).
[109] Another, Ralph C. Flint, echoes this concern in a 1945 issue of the *Journal of Higher Education*, citing a "10 per cent" reduction in faculty "since the regular session of 1939-40" (Flynt 198).
[110] For one thing, "higher salaries and stipends were needed to attract better faculty and better graduate students" to a variety of programs across universities, but particularly those who struggled to compete with more robustly funded elite colleges and universities, resulting in the increased stratification in higher education I discuss in the introduction to this chapter. (Geiger 82).

developing exploitative “Lay Readership Programs” to assist with the grading that professors and graduate students were too overburdened to handle[111]. Cultural, material, and curricular shifts in the academy pushed administrators and educators alike to seek creative solutions to what were, in short, expensive problems.

While the throng of veteran-students and conversations about General Education temporarily reinforced the emphasis on research universities as teaching institutions primarily concerned with the education of undergraduates, these universities soon shifted their attentions toward the new, lucrative postwar research economy. During the war, massive federal support for research resulted in advances in atomic energy, radar, “Jet and rocket propulsion, radio technologies, computing, and medical advancement” (Geiger 73). Vannevar Bush, director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, encouraged President Roosevelt in 1944 to request a large investment in scientific research, outsourced to civilian universities, to continue the momentum of wartime scientific progress. The funding allocated to research universities as a result of Roosevelt’s legislation not only emphasized the importance of federally funded fields in the sciences—such as the increasingly prominent discipline of Physics—but also served to increase competition among universities for talented scholars and scientists. The influence of the federal government on higher education was a concern for many university faculty members, as they felt this would distort the purpose of higher education. This transitional period changed higher education in significant, and perhaps unexpected, ways. First and foremost, it emphasized the hard sciences over the liberal arts, distorting the previous model of higher education as an

[111] One cheap solution was the use of “lay readers” and graders to alleviate some of the burden for professors and graduate students in first-year courses, the majority of whom were college educated homemakers. See Kelly Ritter, “‘Ladies Who Don’t Know Us Correct Our Papers’: Postwar Lay Readership Programs and Twenty-First Century Contingent Labor in First-Year Writing,” *College Composition and Communication*. 63.6 (2012)

institution for producing knowledge across disciplines[112]. The rush for federal funding thus gave rise to what were known as "the four Ds": "distortion of academic research, displacement of other university functions, dependence on federal research funding, and domination by the federal government" (Geiger 75). Additionally, the Commission on Financing Higher Education (CFHE, est. 1947) warned that an increased role of the federal government in institutions of higher education had the potential to "produce uniformity, mediocrity and compliance'" in place of objective research and knowledge production (qtd. Geiger 75). The rush for federal funding also supported the cultural shift on campuses from liberal arts "truth-seeking" to scientific "discovery" and "invention"; or, as some have put it, the shift toward "programmatic" education with an applicable end[113].

Roach's impression and Conant's assertion that a wider acceptance of democratic thinking and dissemination was the chief cultural concern of the immediate postwar period demonstrates the mounting urgency with which the middlebrow begins to take root in the academy and thus situate itself as a dominant culture in the U.S. Competition between universities for federal funding was unrelated to the increased presence of veteran-students on campuses, but the significant shift in the focus of higher education demonstrates yet another way in which the academy was influenced by changes in postwar values and attitudes and began moving toward a middlebrow ethic. The emphasis on practical or programmatic learning in some ways shifts the image of the university away from an exclusionary, elitist ivory tower and onto the dissemination of knowledge and information to the masses.

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[112] This is not to say that this devaluation of the liberal arts in the U.S. happened for the first time in the postwar rush for federal funding. The Land Grant College Act/ Morrill Act of 1862 began the slow but steady prioritization of "practical" subjects such as the sciences by establishing and financing colleges specializing in "agriculture and the mechanical arts." I suggest that the increased funding dedicated to atomic and nuclear power as well as physics, together with the contemporaneous General Education Movement, situated the humanities and liberal arts subjects as extraneous, contributing to their later status as feminized subjects.

[113] See Herbold (106) and Geiger (75-85)

The role of higher education in the maintenance of middle-class status is evident also in the unexpected interplay between the dream of college education and that of homeownership in suburban communities. While the academy underwent significant cultural, material, and curricular changes and higher education took on new significance in the American imagination, the flood of GIs returning to the home front had perhaps its most significant impact on the housing market and in civil planning. The postwar housing crisis, which reached its peak in 1947, caused builders and city planners to search for creative solutions for affordable housing. The planned, suburban community became the most popular and longest-lasting solution. In fact, since WWII, 85% of all growth has occurred in the suburbs[114]. Although a college education was not necessary to *afford* the suburban lifestyle—especially for those utilizing the veterans' home loan benefits—the experience of college attendance became in many ways *part* of the suburban experience and a symbol of American Dream attainment. More than any other commodity, however, home ownership became for many the most important signifier of middle-class status, and was the crucial site of middlebrow domesticity.

III. GIs at Home: The Impact of GI Bill Housing Benefits, the Suburban Boom, and the Threats of Uniform(ity) and Conformity

> The tenant agrees not to permit the premises to be used or occupied by any person other than members of the Caucasian race. But the employment and maintenance of other than Caucasian domestic servants shall be permitted.
>
> William Levitt, Levittown restrictive covenant (1947)

> Thus the suburb served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion… This was not merely a child-center environment: it was based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure principle.
>
> Lewis Mumford, *The City of History* (1961)

[114] See Keeler

If the education benefits promised to veterans by the post-WWII GI bill served to widen the education disparity between white male middle-and-upper class students and their female and nonwhite peers, the stampede to provide housing for returning servicemembers—and the resulting suburban frontier—reinforced the social and civic boundaries drawn by informal segregation. The effects of "white flight" from the cities and the vast expansion of suburban communities had lasting effects on the social, civil, and academic sectors of American life. In fact, the movement out of the city and into the suburb was in many ways envisioned as the "new frontier" of American life[115], and critics and advertisers alike capitalized on the suburbs' expansion into previously agricultural land. Many suburban homeowners moved from cramped and crowded cities, others relocated from rural areas, making the suburban community appear even more diverse as neighbors' prior experience was varied. Wherever they had lived before, suburbanites were brought together by an unprecedented need for housing, and the new solution drawn to meet that need. In her discussion of postwar suburban housing, Barbara M. Kelly takes for granted that there are two fundamental aspects of the American Dream[116] which postwar veteran's assistance programs make possible: first, "the privately owned house and lot," and second (but perhaps more importantly), "the opportunity to earn one's upward mobility through hard work and dedication" (Kelly 27). Although home ownership and the belief that hard work can lead to upward mobility are essential aspects of the American Dream as constructed in this period, I argue that Kelly's assumptions about the American Dream lack its most frequently overlooked, but perhaps most enduring, motivating desire—the cultivation of middlebrow taste, and through it, acceptance into and by the middle class. As I have demonstrated throughout the

[115] See Keeler; Bennett, *When Dreams Came True,* 24

[116] Barbara M. Kelly, "Little Boxes, Big Ideas," *Design Quarterly* 158 (1993); Kelly's book-length study of two of the Levitt & Sons suburban projects in Long Island (Island Trees and Levittown), reinforces the centrality of home ownership and occupation to the American Dream in its very title: *Expanding the American Dream* (1993).

dissertation, the middlebrow is often associated with the domestic sphere, is concerned with behaviors and social norms, and is attentive to fashion trends; I argue that the middlebrow is inherently democratic in the sense that it makes an object or idea widely accessible to a consumer aspiring to (or already a part of) the middle class. The production, maintenance, and fashioning of planned suburban communities are no exception. Because an object or idea is considered middlebrow when the person consuming the object is perceived as imitative or aspirational, we can take the cookie-cutter form of the suburban home, its appliances, and its furnishings, as a prime example of how what is perceived as middlebrow is deeply connected to classed, gendered, and racialized concerns.

In the aftermath of WWII, peacetime prosperity rather than pre-war 'normalcy' was the purported goal of the government and cultural system alike. Wherever it was 'earned,' this prosperity was to be *displayed* in the home, and in particular, the home in the new booming suburban housing market. While suburbs had existed in the 1920s and 1930s—in fact, contemporary architectural historian Lewis Mumford explains in *The City of History* (1961) that suburbs have existed in some form or another as long as cities themselves have—they were usually reserved for the wealthy and occasionally the upper-middle class. The suburb of the 1950s was notably different from those of previous periods, however, and was characterized by its gargantuan scale as well as, for critics like Mumford, the "bland ritual of competitive spending" in which its residents engaged (Mumford 486). While urban sprawl had more than its fair share of civil and social ills, the "suburban exodus," characterized by white flight from urban areas, presented in the eyes of critics like Lewis Mumford "the temptation to retreat from unpleasant realities, to shirk public duties, and to find the whole meaning of life in the most elemental social group, the family, or even in the still more isolated and self-centered individual"

(Mumford 486). Critics of the rapid expansion of suburban communities saw the suburbs as ultimately threatening to social stability—the suburbs, for critics like Mumford, had the potential to operate as silos, insulating suburbanites from the "unpleasant realities" of the outside world, and therefore allowing them to "shirk public duties" to neighbor and community in favor of remaining in their pristine and particularly curated suburbia. For critics like Mumford That suburbs became accessible to more than the upper-middle-class and wealthy home buyer meant that these anticipated social problems might expand along with the expanding middle class.

One building firm in particular had an undeniable influence on the accessibility of suburban housing, as well as the lasting image of the suburban neighborhood and planned community as a utopic symbol of the American Dream. Levitt & Sons began as a modest building firm catering to the upper and upper-middle-class market, primarily because the more affluent markets were the only ones available during the early days of Great Depression, but came to effectively monopolize the suburban planning and building market as a result of WWII and its aftermath. Their first projects reflected their genteel market, with higher price tags, more lavish landscaping, and a greater variety of house plans. Levitt & Sons soon abandoned their customizable model, however, in favor of a streamlined, pre-planned selection of blueprints, which would save considerable cost and time. Although not the first to introduce pre-production, specialized construction crews, or mass housing, Levitt & Sons revolutionized the market by combining these with building supplies in bulk directly from manufacturers, and partnering with top brands (like General Electric) to provide mass housing that strode the line between innovatively modern and comfortingly familiar. Although home ownership was incentivized and renting was seen as less acceptable than owning in many middle-class circles, post-war housing projects included homes for rent, including housing built exclusively for veterans. The suburban

landscape of the 1950s also differed from that of previous decades in the diversity it demonstrated—while not diverse in terms of race, or even in terms of class in any real meaningful way, occupants of suburban homes could now be renters rather than exclusively homeowners. Thus, while ownership was a considerable marker of belonging and achievement of middle-class status, it was not the only avenue to residence in a middle-class neighborhood. In 1947, Levitt & Sons embarked on a post-war housing project exclusively for veterans, advertised as $60 per month rent or a $52 per month mortgage payment. As Kelly (1993, p. 31) argues, the mortgage payment advertised was 'almost ten dollars lower than the monthly rental at Island Trees, and—coupled with full financing of the mortgage [provided by the GI bill]—made proprietary housing by far the better investment for home-seeking veterans.'

Because a large body of multidisciplinary scholarship discusses the links between race, class, homeownership, design, and furnishing to identity formation, I do not seek to replicate that work here—rather, I offer as many sources and summaries as seem necessary in the footnotes, and focus primarily on links between the broader identity formation discussed by a select number of scholars and the complicated experience of nonwhite veterans which scholars in other fields provide. I argue that the presentation of race and class in the suburban landscape highlights the unspoken and invisible but culturally reinforced notion that the American Dream is one created for and protected by both a real and imagined white consumer[117]. To this end, I use Levitt & Sons' Island Trees and Levittown as representative neighborhoods, about which a significant body of scholarship exists. The following sub-sections will examine the role of race and middle-class identity in the construction and occupation of suburban communities, and the significance of the home in materially displaying that identity.

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[117] That the American Dream is the inherited right of white men is an argument I make more explicitly in my analysis of the endings of *The Great Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in Chapter 3.

a. Race and Middle-Class Identity: Constructing Whiteness in the Suburban Neighborhood

Perhaps the most significant cultural impact of suburban sprawl was not only the role of the suburbs in cementing the significance of commodity in the American Dream, but also the conception of a unified whiteness which subsumed previously distinct ethnic subcultures. The pervasive belief in the multiculturalism of American culture and the imagery of the United States as a melting pot of ethnic, religious, and national identity gained traction in the 1950s[118]. The postwar demand for housing and subsequent boom in suburban planned communities facilitated the final consummation of the lived quest for the American Dream as consumer-driven, middlebrow, middle-class living. The planned communities created and built by Levitt & Sons between 1942 and 1951 present a representative picture of the middlebrow, postwar *home* of the American Dream.

The GI bill funded the purchase of 2.5 million homes[119] and the construction of an additional 4.3 million homes, constituting an estimated combined worth of $33 million[120], marking its significance to what would become a major shift in the articulation of the American Dream. As I have argued, home ownership is an important aspect of the American Dream, and is a signifier of belonging and middle-class status as well as the site of middlebrow domesticity. As in other middlebrow institutions discussed in this dissertation, consumers ("average" working class and lower-middle-class Americans, regardless of race) were anxious to firmly establish themselves as members of the middle class and thus as rightful inheritors of the promises of the American Dream, and now increasingly turned to the idea of homeownership to achieve this. The

[118] See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of A Different Color*; Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (2011)
[119] Data courtesy of the veterans' affairs website, va.gov
[120] Keeler, 82; Veterans' Affairs website, "Our History"

most obvious course of action towards mobility for this group, as I have argued, is through the accumulation and curation of particular commodities to demonstrate one's class status (or one's aspiration to that status). As with education, home ownership had been difficult to achieve for many outside of the upper class before WWII. While home ownership had signified middle-class status (at the very least) in the 19th century as well, "the terms of the GI bill and the availability of FHA loans meant that for the first time, home ownership became possible for many members of the white working classes[121] in the postwar era" (Harris, *Second Suburb* 205). Yet, with greater access to this opportunity came an increased anxiety about one's "right" to homeownership, though this anxiety was increasingly directed at efforts to integrate Black families into almost entirely white suburban neighborhoods.

Although almost one third of all WWII veterans took advantage of these generous housing entitlements, non-white men and women veterans often faced considerable challenges in obtaining admittance to new housing projects, whether for purchase or rent, beyond obtaining a loan. The Federal Housing Administration initially recommended restrictive racial covenants to promote peace in homogenous communities and thus as an incentive for builders. Although the Supreme Court ruled them unenforceable in 1948, builders like William Levitt promised the use of Levittown and his other planned communities to "members of the Caucasian race only." The prosperity, unity, and wealth (both economic and cultural) of the United States was framed by politicians and advertisers as innately American characteristics in opposition to the lack of freedoms in, first, the Axis powers during WWII, and later in the Soviet Union in the 'post-war'

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[121] It is interesting to note the discrepancy between veterans' pursuit of higher education compared with their use of the GI bill to purchase a home. As Stanley (part 1) argues, the GI bill did not necessarily encourage more working-class veterans to attend college, and yet, scholars like Harris note that the GI bill made homeownership possible for many men of the same class. In a separate project, it would be interesting to trace the cultural connections between education and home ownership since, as discussed previously, both are related to cultural expectations and social conditions.

era. U.S. prosperity was imaged in the homogenous, cooperative community—in other words, a peaceful *white* community—the most potent symbol of which became the suburban home encapsulated by the Levittown neighborhoods[122]. As John A. Powell and Jason Reece note, “mass produced suburbs, such as Levittown in Long Island, not only offered homes that all looked the same but promised neighbors [sic] who all looked the same, too” (Powell and Reece 213). Thus, anxiety about race and ethnicity in the post-war period came to intersect with middlebrow anxiety over a more generalized belonging, which some builders and community planners sought to ease by enacting restrictive covenants in their communities.

While the idea of a whitewashed suburban community in the postwar era may not be surprising, it is paramount to remember that until this time, ethnic divides and racial tension had meant a largely fragmented and narrow concept of “whiteness.” Irish, Italian, Eastern European, and Jewish- Americans, for example, were still not considered as “white” as English or Swedish-descended Americans until significant shifts in WWII and postwar racial thinking established a more encompassing definition of whiteness. Matthew Frye Jacobson’s analysis of whiteness seeks to move race to the “foreground of historiography on European immigration and assimilation” in order to examine and dispel the myth that “American” national identity was built on an ideal of ethnic inclusion and multiculturalism. Jacobson argues in contrast to Oscar Handlin[123] and John Higham[124], that racism and the conferral or denial of whiteness has been “among the central organizers of the political life of the republic all along” rather than an

[122] Ironically, this very example of state-sanctioned, culturally enforced racism was weaponized by the Soviet Union as a propagandistic argument against the U.S. See Jodi Melamed, “Neoliberal Multiculturalism” (2006, p. 4).
[123] Notable especially for his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (1951), which discusses the European migrations that made the “melting pot” of American culture so impressive.
[124] An American historian of ethnicity, Higham also furthered the idea of American culture as a melting pot of ethnic, religious, and national identity, and was a critic of Consensus theory, which claims that meaningful social change comes when people agree on a set of values, customs, experiences or institutions rather than through conflict.

aberration or exception at particular moments interspersed throughout American history. While he argues that white people did not experience the same kinds of discrimination as Black or indigenous peoples in the United States, he discusses in great detail the "[c]ontradictory racial identities[125] [which came] to coexist at the same moment in the same body in unstable combinations" between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (142). During the 1920s, the term "Caucasian" became increasingly common, and was seen as a distinct grouping in the family of races ("Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malay, and American,") as ethnic differences between white ethnic subcultures soon "refused to register as *racial* at all" (78, 90). In fact, Jacobson argues, as interest shifted in the 20th century from "race" to "race relations," which was mostly focused on "the divide between black and white," whiteness came to include increasing numbers of formerly ethnically distinct subgroups (108)[126]. By the Cold War, however, a complex system of race distinctions had developed into a strict Black/ white dichotomy, which at this time gave way to a fluid scheme of white/ other, which itself implied and absence of race on the white side and a presence of race on all other sides (Jacobson 110-11). Though this white/ other dichotomy is, as Jacob argues, fluid, it is most visibly seen in media at the time as the pre-Civil Rights Black-white divide—the severity of which is only amplified in the microcosm of the early suburban landscape[127].

[125] These "contradictory racial identities" account for the treatment of, for example, the Irish, who simultaneously benefitted from the privileges of whiteness and Caucasian identity in certain sociocultural spheres, and were discriminated against and racialized in others. Jacobson notes that as the numbers of southern and eastern European immigrants increased, panic about the degeneration of the white race rose, finally culminating in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which essentially limited immigration to northern Europeans.

[126]Jacobson argues that, at this time, "the Caucasian and the Negroid" occupied most attention, while the "mongoloid (Asian)" became almost civically invisible, occasionally subsumed into Caucasian, but most often simply ignored (108).

[127] Though this white/ other dichotomy is, as Jacob argues, fluid, it is most visibly seen in media at the time as the pre-Civil Rights Black-white divide—the severity of which is only amplified in the microcosm of the early suburban landscape.

Like the GI bill's education benefits, home loan provisions under the GI bill were generous, but the language of the bill was such that racist and sexist institutions could still prevent nonwhite men and women from taking advantage of these entitlements. Chapter V, section 500(a) of the bill states:

> Any [qualifying[128]] veteran may apply within two years after separation from the military or naval forces, or two years after termination of the war… but in no event more than five years after the termination of the war, to the Administrator of Veterans' Affairs for the guaranty by the Administrator of not to exceed 50 per centum of a loan or loans for any of the purposes specified in sections 501, 502 and 503: *Provided*, That the aggregate amount shall not exceed $2,000. If the Administrator finds that the veteran is eligible for the benefits of this title and that the loan applied for appears practicable, the Administrator [of Veteran's Affairs] shall guarantee the payment of the part thereof as set forth in this title.

Here, the "language disorder" of American policy is evident[129]; that any qualifying veteran is entitled to these benefits, and that the section heading '*Provided*' does not explicitly necessitate whiteness as a prerequisite demonstrates first and foremost that, as Melamed argues, "To be American is to occupy the place of the universal subject, for which whiteness [i]s… the synecdoche" (Melamed 8). Additionally, although the bill states that "No first mortgage shall be ineligible for insurance under the National Housing Act," in the cases of nonwhite homeowners, courts often found this provision "legally unenforceable," as in the case of the Myers—the first Black family to move into Levittown—whose home insurance was rescinded after repeated attacks and vandalism of their home by white neighbors[130]. Mr. Myers and his wife were similar to other Levittown residence in all but skin color. Although he was a WWII veteran and *was* eventually able to make use of his GI bill housing provisions[131], the insurance company's ability

[128] See my introduction to this chapter, which clarifies the definition of "qualifying" veterans
[129] See Melamed article, p. 19
[130] Sugrue, 170
[131] The Myers had extensive help from the Quaker community in Philadelphia, which sought to integrate suburban communities because of their belief that constant, everyday exposure to people of all races would eliminate racism. See Sugrue, 168-70

to refuse Mr. Myers' coverage demonstrates the ways in which the state allows segregation to be enforced informally through patterns of deliberate application and bureaucratic obstacles.

Statistics on other racial and ethnic groups evidence a similarly dismal reality for nonwhite veterans[132] who sought to make use of their "GI Bill of Rights." Although the Levitts were themselves Jewish, Jews were initially barred from Levittown because, as William Levitt argued, racially restrictive covenants maintained property value—as whites preferred not to live with nonwhites. In the case of Native American veterans, the home loan program was essentially useless. Keeler notes that "the Advisory Committee on Native American Veterans had been unable to find a single instance of a Native American benefitting from the loan guarantee program because of the unique status of tribal land," until the Native American Direct Loan was established by the VA in 1992 (103). Keeler compares the home loan benefits of the GI bill to the Homestead Act of 1862 "in its ability to dramatically alter the landscape through the expansion and growth of new settlement and housing," noting that 85 percent of all growth post WWII occurred in the suburbs (Keeler 81-2). Keeler argues that the GI bill housing benefits effectively made white suburban homeownership and middleclass membership an exclusively white "right," and further segregated Native Americans from mainstream American culture, including homeownership[133].

Indeed, the language of the GI bill, so carefully constructed and later edited by segregationist senators and members of the white-only American Legion, appears to have been developed so as to rely on the sturdy framework of racist and classist institutions outside of the

[132] See Keeler, Stanley, Geiger; see also Wendy Plotkin, "Hemmed In': The Struggle against Racial Restrictive Covenants and Deed Restrictions in Post-WWII Chicago," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 94.1 (Spring 2001)

[133] In his article on the interplay between the GI bill housing benefits and the contemporaneous American Indian Housing Policy, Keeler notes that Native American veterans who were eligible for GI bill benefits were often discouraged from using them and instead redirected to take advantage of the much less helpful American Indian assistance programs.

military. Thus, even while the GI bill itself does not prohibit nonwhite veterans from making use of its housing provisions, the loopholes provided in the language of the bill allow for significant misuse and discrimination on behalf of lending and insuring institutions as well as building companies, illustrating again what Melamed considers the state's ability to "ascribe stigma to segments of [nonwhite] society without the act of ascription appearing to be an act of racial power" and instead make it appear "as fair, expected, and right" when nonwhite veterans are denied their entitlements (Melamed 8). That housing communities' segregated natures were presented as issues of 'individual morality' allowed the state to excuse, for example, the Levitts' insistence on racially restrictive covenants as exercises in free enterprise on which the state would not infringe. The prosperity, unity, and wealth (both economic and cultural) of the United States was framed by politicians and advertisers as innately American characteristics in opposition to the lack of freedoms in, first, the Axis powers during WWII, and later in the Soviet Union in the 'post-war' era. U.S. prosperity was imaged in the homogenous, cooperative community—in other words, a peaceful *white* community—the most potent symbol of which became the suburban home encapsulated by the Levittown neighborhoods[134]. Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP argued in 1951 that "What the courts have forbidden state legislatures and city councils to do and what the Klu Klux Klan has not been able to accomplish by intimidation and violence, federal policy is accomplishing through a monumental program of segregation in all aspects of Housing which receive Government aid" (Mitchell, qtd. Harris 35). As Thomas Creighton, editor of *Progressive Architecture* in the postwar period, acquiesced: "we must operate within our existing social structure."[135] In their willingness to financially support

[134] Ironically, this very example of state-sanctioned, culturally enforced racism was weaponized by the Soviet Union as a propagandistic argument against the U.S. See Jodi Melamed, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism" (2006, p. 4).
[135] CITATION NEEDED ft ch2, 21

exclusionary businesses, the state demonstrated an approval of the enforcement of white supremacy through extralegal means.

Where the first Levittown in Long Island, New York, represented a monotonous and homogenous landscape, the second suburb (by the same name) in Buck Country Pennsylvania presented the contradictory illusions of, on the one hand, diversity in background (with four different house plans available, and varying price tags to suit the working and middle classes), and yet also homogeneity in the ethnic appearance of its residents. While some racially restrictive covenants prohibited individuals from buying or occupying homes in certain communities on the basis of their ethnicity, Harris, Kelly, Powell and Reece, and others have noted that restriction was complicated by racial passing as well as the elimination of racial categories and adoption of the concept of ethnicity discussed previously[136]. It is important to stress that while the majority of the suburban landscape was populated by exclusively white-identified occupants, this was not due to a lack of demand on the part of nonwhite consumers, but rather to a combination of legal and informal enforcement of segregationist practices. While African Americans had established these kinds of homogenous suburban communities prior to WWII, the homogeneity of those communities only highlighted the pervasiveness of segregation[137]. On the whole, however, "By restricting sale of their houses to whites," Harris notes, "Levitt & Sons clearly intended that all of their houses would be owned and occupied by a generically conceived group of middle-class whites" (238). The concept of a homogenous, "generically conceived group of middle-class whites" as the ideal consumer—held by builders like the Levitts and their suppliers, such as GE—is not necessarily entirely new to the American

[136] See Harris, *Little White Houses*, ch1; Harris, "'The House I Live In'", *Second Suburb*. Although many nonwhite veterans struggled against the racist infrastructure of housing communities at home, it is also important to note that not all housing projects—and not all suburban communities—were restricted to whites.
[137] John A. Powell and Jason Reece, 213. See also Andrew Wiese (2004)

imagination, but still serves to demonstrate the significance of the movement toward the suburbs for solidifying and consolidating a more singular definition of whiteness. This idealized white homeowner, combined with the increase in available and affordable housing for veterans, works to reinforce the idea that home ownership in exclusive suburbs is a privilege reserved for whites.[138] Thus, anxiety about race and ethnicity in the postwar period came to intersect with middlebrow anxiety over belonging. The stakes of what to consume increased, and the Middlebrow Home came to signify an essential marker of belonging for the American Dreamer—the construction of whiteness.

b. The Middlebrow Home of the American Dream(ers)

In the words of Benedict Anderson, "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 15). The primacy of imaginative style is no less true of suburban communities in the postwar period than of the nations to which Anderson refers in his foundational text. As communities, suburbs are imagined through literature, television, magazine advertisements, and newspaper materials—that is, primarily through middlebrow literary and cultural institutions. Thus, the stakes of interior design and decorating were perhaps higher in the postwar period than ever before. The iconography of the American Dream displayed in this media is just as—if not more—important than the *sentiment* or aspiration to upward mobility associated with it. Magazine advertisements help to demonstrate the *informal* enforcement of law: the image *is* the dream, the illusion, the end goal, and the American Dream is the quest towards (and sometimes the achievement of) that image.

[138] It also contributes to the cultural amnesia surrounding nonwhite and female contribution to the war effort. For a more thorough discussion of this topic, see Anna Froula, "Free a man to fight: the figure of the female soldier in World War II popular culture," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 2.2, 153-65. (2009); See also Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property" (1993)

Although throughout the dissertation I trouble the characterization of the middlebrow as highly feminized, women's role in the cultivation of an appropriately middlebrow aesthetic is inextricable from the family's success in presenting itself as belonging to and in the suburb. The strict social maintenance of separate spheres in the postwar era, whether embraced on an individual level or not, revived the 19th century image of the wife as the "angel of the house." Women's magazines, such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Good Housekeeping* advised their readers on the appropriate consumption, accumulation, and display of items which, as Harris argues, would properly denote their racial and class status. These magazines, and the women designers employed to educate their readers, argued that women held immense responsibility not simply for decorating the home, but for "the majority of consumption" because they "controlled the plurality of household income," and thus interior design was presented as a visible manifestation of both the power women held and their care for their family and home (Bindas 124).

While women were often seen as primarily responsible for the interior furnishing and styling of the home, the creation or customization of a *home-as-space* was advertised as a shared endeavor between husband and wife. Kenneth J. Bindas (2017, p. 119) explains, that 'the men designed,' while 'the decoration of the home was the purview of the women.' The woman of the house was responsible for nurturing and hosting, accommodating the needs of both family and guests, and maintaining the overall image of the idealized American family within the home. Advertisements in this period demonstrate that the purchase and display of 'proper' commodities would adequately fulfil her domestic responsibility without encroaching on her husband's masculine role as provider. In a 1945 *Better Homes & Gardens* advertisement for custom kitchen countertops, a sympathetic, feminized narrator argues that 'It's high time… that the woman who

uses the kitchen should have more to say about what goes into it, and where.' In the same issue, an advertisement for Crosley's refrigerators features a woman illustrator who is anxious to earn the approval of her fiancé's mother, who is stopping by unexpectedly, and 'prove to her that a career girl… can be a good wife.' The future mother-in-law is 'quite pleased' with the kitchen that the illustrator had 'designed [her]self.' This refrigerator, the advertisement implies, enables her to complete both her career-work and domestic duties with ease. The future mother-in-law's exclamation of approval—'My dear, how convenient! All that extra front-row space!'—and assurance to 'Fred' that he has wisely chosen a fiancée as 'practical as she is pretty,' suggest that a woman's intuition is worth trusting *within the realm she knows best* (the kitchen/ domestic sphere), and that allowing the wife to, in Kenneth J. Bindas's words (2017, p. 124), 'control[] the plurality of the household income' and consumption will contribute to familial peace and community approval.

Figure 2.1[139]

The 1945 Crosley refrigerator advertisement demonstrates one of many pieces which fit together to confirm a more consistent picture of one coherent American Dream (-home) as constructed by engagement in consumerism and the maintenance of strict, idealized gender roles. Even in the Crosley refrigerator advertisement, the exchange between the two women is facilitated by 'Fred,' a generalized representation of the ideal young American man: white, an Army serviceman, and congenial. Fred's uniform suggests that he is an E5 in the Army—a sergeant in the Army is a non-commissioned officer (enlisted servicemember), which holds more responsibility than the average soldier, typically 'first-in-line leaders' who oversee a team or

[139] Advertisement for a Crosley refrigerator from the October 1945 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens*. Image courtesy of *BH&G Insider* Archive

section of lower-ranking soldiers. This is significant because the advertisement targets the ‘average’ American in this image—not the career-military officers, but also not the lowest-ranking soldiers. While by 1950, the uniform no longer features in advertisement, the gender norms established by wartime military masculinity are wholly integrated into civilian life. A 1950 advertisement for Kelvinator’s ‘kitchen warrior’ reinforces the image of the kitchen as a woman’s domain—but one that is carefully integrated into family life.

Figure 2.2[140]

The advertisement’s image of mother and daughter proudly displaying the bounty of food in their Kelvinator refrigerator demonstrates not only the family’s racialized and classed status, but the carefully constructed boundaries of gender as well. The smaller illustrated images of mother-with-food and supportive-husband-with-child solidify the image of woman as successful within

[140] Advertisement for a Crosley refrigerator from the October 1945 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens*. Image courtesy of *BH&G Insider* Archive

the realm of family life. Both advertisements, and the issues of *Better Homes & Gardens* in which they are featured, target a very particularly raced and classed audience—the white middle- to upper-middle-class—with rigid blueprints for both gender presentation and family life.

In the suburban home, the interior decoration of one's home played a crucial role in *displaying* ones racial, classed, and sexual identity beyond the purchase of appliances like those mentioned above. As Jacobson, Harris, and others argue, one of the great anxieties of the age was the concept of "passing"—of racial "others" integrating into the white community without detection. Harris argues that Jewishness[141] (and other previously nonwhite racial and ethnic identities) not only "persisted as a visual category, something many Americans believed could be seen and recognized in the physiognomy of individuals," but "could also, by extension, be seen and recognized in house design and material culture, and in decorating and design preferences" (33). While the houses themselves, which residents could not influence, denoted a particular kind of classed and racialized identity[142], the interior was available for customization, and tailoring one's space to their desired impression was not only expected, but an essential aspect of suburban identity and community formation. If the interior of one's home now signified not only of one's middle-class-ness, but their educational attainment and racial identity (aspects of 'culture') as well, several questions become even more pressing for middlebrow suburbanites than for their urban middlebrow predecessors: How might one differentiate their home from identical suburban tracts, yet maintain an appropriate level of conformity? How was one to properly display their status in the home? How might one denote these differences? What objects would be read as appropriately white and middle-class, and which would be interpreted instead

[141] See also Daniel Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures* , p21

[142] See Harris (2010, p. 202-209)

as the tacky accumulation which characterized the homes of ‘wannabes’ or ‘nouveau arrivistes’ (Karen Brodkin, qtd. Harris 2010, p. 32)?

The use of books as objects for display—which Megan Benton (1997) described as *bookaflage*[143]—rather than as texts for intellectual consumption demonstrates the interconnectedness of the changing housing and educational landscapes in the U.S. in the post-war period and signals the shift in the place of higher education within the U.S. cultural imagination. “After all,” Harris notes, “occupants of Levitt houses stood to lose a great deal—both socially and economically—if they were seen as not-quite white, as immigrants, as Jews, as members of a particular ethnic group that was seen as ‘stained’ (Italian, Irish, or Polish, for example), as lower-class *arrivistes*, or even as ‘white trash’” (Harris, *Second Suburb* 238). This use of books arose primarily from the measurable cultural value of *having* books, compared to the much more elusive value of having *read* them. Although ‘frivolous and pretentious uses of books’ (Benton 1997, p.268) had hardly waned since the U.S. print industry’s production boom in the 1920s, *bookaflage* accrues more cultural significance in the ‘post-war’ era as a tool much like its linguistic cousin, military *camouflage*: where camouflage is often seen as a metonym for military service, *bookaflage* came to be an integral part of home décor and thus a signal of American Dream achievement. The kinds of books one might display, including topic and color, were considered material signifiers of the homeowner’s identities, including class and education level. As previously noted, the university classroom was not the only site for ‘book-learning’. In fact, the books on display in the home library (or living room) demonstrated those selected for the pursuit of information, but also those read for pleasure. Pleasure, in fact, is an important aspect of the middlebrow aesthetic. Alex H. Poole (2017, p. 475) notes that ‘Just as the average

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143 See Megan Benton (1997), “Too Many Books”

level of education among Americans increased post-war (largely due to the GI Bill), so too did the overall frequency of book buying and book reading… Sundry retail outlets peddled paperbacks that cost no more than a movie ticket, encouraging men of all social classes to consume them… As a percentage of Americans' recreational spending, books reached a new high (32 percent).'

Rooms with books are friendly rooms

Color, charm, character—your rooms gain all these with books

By Gerry Stoner

You hear a lot about friendly rooms—and schemes that make your rooms more inviting. But one of the simplest ways to get that friendly atmosphere is to tuck bookshelves into a corner or parade books and shelves across a wall.

Open bookshelves that bid you to reach in and pick out a novel add hospitality to your rooms. The textures of the book bindings spell warmth; the colors of the bindings and the jackets perk up your color scheme. Books also reflect your interests and hobbies—so they become a very personal expression of you. (See how much you can guess about friends by scanning the titles of the books they own.)

With planning, you can put your bookshelves to extra uses, too. Cut shelves low and wide so the top can double as an end table. Place shelves at right angles to the wall and they'll partition off one end of the room. Build shelves up around windows to substitute for curtains.

Set your imagination free and see how you can use bookshelves to make your home more attractive, more inviting. Here are six shelf arrangements. They may give you ideas.

Capitalize on a handsome love seat by surrounding it with bookshelves that reach to the ceiling. Cabinets built as part of the book unit are the right height to serve as end tables. That trailing plant you see on the middle shelf breaks the horizontal line of books and shelves—a good trick to remember when you decorate bookcases

Dress a window by building book-shelves at either side of the casing. Books take the place of draperies or curtains which might shut out the sun. Plant brackets at the sides of window and knickknack space along the sill tie the shelves together

Divide one room into two by letting a bookcase suggest a wall. Here shelves and a desk form a protected bed alcove in the study. You can use the same partial wall principle to separate your entry hall from your living room or to screen off the dining area in your living-dining room

BETTER HOMES & GARDENS, AUGUST, 1949

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Figure 2.3a[144]

144 "Rooms with books are Friendly Rooms," from the August 1949 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens* demonstrating how to decorate a room with books based on color and appearance (not content). Image courtesy of *BH&G Insider* Archive.

Figure 2.3b[145]

Design and interior decorating trends in 'post-war' suburbia (represented best in the case of Levittown) demonstrates the extent to which the middlebrow concern with domesticity moves beyond the pages of novels and advertisements and into the lived experience of suburban families, whose accumulation and display of 'things'—including those same books and magazines—was an essential marker of their racial and class belonging. Harris observes that, in a satirical article, the social historian and *Harper's* editor Russel Lynes recommended homeowners display 'more than the usual number of books, some drawings and probably a painting or two' (qtd. Harris 2010, p.238). Additionally, he suggests that one 'ostentatiously display the *New Yorker* on the coffee table,' and 'move the TV from the living room to the den, serve wine with meals, [or] join the Book-of-the-Month Club' (qtd. Harris 2010, p.238). These recommendations, Harris (2010, p.238) argues, demonstrate that 'status differentiation became a matter of carefully chosen and subtle gradations' of design, decoration, and display. Lynes'

[145] Excerpt and images from "A Top Development House," John Normille, A.I.A., from the May 1955 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens* showing a white family gathering in the living room and sunroom. Image courtesy of *BH&G Insider* Archive.

recommendation to adhere to middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club and *The New Yorker* is significant here. The popularity and reputation of middlebrow print materials which sought to democratize elite thought, manners, and 'things' mark a significant shift in power from the producer, the elite, and the middlebrow or mass consumer. Where previously, ''Good taste' could be standardized in each generation by those who knew,' Harvard president Bryant Conant (1945, p. ix) argues in his introduction to the Harvard Committee report that in the mid-century, the US. is increasingly 'concerned with a general education—a liberal education—not for the relatively few, but for a multitude.' Levittown design and interior decorating demonstrates the extent to which the middlebrow concern with domesticity moves beyond the pages of novels and advertisements and into the lived experience of suburban families, whose accumulation and display of "things" was an essential marker of their racial and class belonging.

In the case of middlebrow taste, the world imagined as white and middle-class is reinforced in advertising as well as in the rows upon rows of houses in self-contained, insulated suburbs. The images of the suburban home and community as uncluttered, pristine, warm, happy, and—without exception—*white* thus come to serve as a kind of "mass ceremony" similar to what Anderson refers to in *Imagined Communities*: as "the newspaper reader, observing the exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours," the middlebrow consumer, aspiring to secure middle-class status, is similarly assured by the images in advertising campaigns for suburban communities that "the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life" (Anderson 39-40). Through *bookaflage*[146], interior design, occupation of

[146] See chapter 3 of the dissertation. Benton's term *bookaflage*, "as broadly understood," is "using books to create a personal environment that suggests or pronounces one's cultural values"—a concept deeply important for understanding middlebrow culture and taste (particularly with regard to the home) in the postwar era (Benton 271). Benton notes that in the 1920s, "nearly 30 percent of magazine ads… us[ed] books as props or part of the

pre-planned mass housing tracts like Levittown, and assurance by popular and shelter magazines, "fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations," and, I argue, of the fiction of the American Dream (Anderson 40). The hallmarks of middlebrow culture become, in the words of Benedict Anderson, "mode[s] of apprehending the world," and the American Dream, as we "think the nation" (Anderson 35). Although a middlebrow sensibility, promoted through mass print cultures like popular women's and shelter magazines, *did* create a "mode of apprehending" the nation and the American Dream, that is not to say that all embraced this vision of the American Dream willingly. As Daniel Horowitz notes, social critics feared that "advertising, television, public relations campaigns, and suburban living eroded cultural standards, raising the prospect of the ascendancy of the lowest common denominator" (Horowitz 19). As with other middlebrow institutions I examine throughout this dissertation, the democratization of homeownership (as well as education), and particularly of suburban existence, came to be gendered feminine. Although the city was not necessarily the site of masculine existence, the suburb certainly was not. The suburb, like the home, the kitchen, and childrearing, was subsumed in a cloud of domesticity, increasingly seen as the woman's domain as the postwar era rolled on.

The conformity and uniformity of the suburbs was heavily criticized not only by architectural historians like Lewis Mumford, but also critics like Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, whose co-authored 1957 book *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America,*

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background scene to telegraph implicit messages about the intelligence, social class, and personal values of the depicted subjects," thus demonstrating their significance as socioeconomic and cultural markers (271). Similarly, Harris notes that magazine images and the words which accompanied them created an iconography and lexicon which presented suburban housekeeping as an implicitly white right, just as books had done in advertisements previously.

contributed but also troubled some of the academic hysteria surrounding the so-called deterioration of "culture." Rosenberg heavily criticized mass culture, and the threat of sameness dominated his criticism. Horowitz observes in *Consuming Pleasures* (1993) that a "series of words that would appear throughout the book dominated his essay: sameness, interchangeable, dehumanized, deadened, bored, alienated, lonely, entrapped, anxious, manipulated, and vulgar" (Horowitz 23). This concern with uniformity and conformity became deeply enmeshed in gendered anxieties about the virility of the nation. As Horowitz notes: "Only partly hidden in all this was a fear of male homosexuality. If popular culture was feminized and swept up gay men in its wake, then a tough masculine high culture would protect against both the feminization of American culture and what many contemporaries assumed was its corollary, the influence of effete, homosexual men" (Horowitz 22). An assumed consequence of this feminization was, of course, the inability of the nation to fight off foreign threats—at this time, the Soviet Union in the early years of the Cold War. While Rosenberg strongly criticized mass culture, White instead considered it enriching. But Rosenberg's belief in the dangers of mass culture were supported by other cultural critics, such as Dwight Macdonald, whose "The Theory of Mass Culture" (1953) shared "an assertion of the importance of cultural hierarchy, with elite modernism in ascendancy over what they saw as a debased mass culture produced by a greedy culture industry and consumed by a passive and deluded public" (Horowitz 28). The question of whether maintain some kind of cultural or academic hierarchy had been debated from then on through the culture wars of the 1980s.

Close analysis of the post-WWII GI bill Education and Housing benefits demonstrates how these entitlements enabled (select) veterans to make significant capitalist investments in their society which have had long-lasting social and economic effects, not the least of which is

the enduring mythology of the middlebrow American Dream as connected to a bootstrap work ethic. In the postwar era, the suburban boom and the rise of General Education demonstrate in part the ways in which the post-WWII GI bill benefitted the white community as a whole, including those who had not served. Books which servicemembers had read on deployment thanks to programs like the Council on Books in Wartime's Armed Services Editions were integrated into General Education courses and distributed through middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club and mass-market dime stores. The emphasis on practical or programmatic learning emphasized by general education programs in the U.S. in some ways shifts the image of the university away from an exclusionary, elitist ivory tower and onto the dissemination of knowledge and information to the masses. Perhaps unexpectedly, this dissemination came to take its place, post-war, in the middle-class home as increasing numbers of college graduates—many of them GIs—settled in the suburbs.

Conclusion

I argue that as long as the image and the lexicon of the American Dream persist in U.S. legislation and advertising, academic analysis of it remains relevant, and a deep understanding of the middlebrow—what constitutes it, its impact, and its participants—is inextricable from that analysis. I argue that it is essential to understand the cultural and academic shifts of the midcentury in order to clearly demonstrate how and why the middlebrow has a central place in the American imaginary, in the construction of American identity, and in discussions of the American Dream. I have demonstrated throughout this chapter that in this period the middlebrow is not only the primary vehicle for the ideological formation of the American Dream, but in fact is also promoted with the Dream as a common sense understanding of what it means to be American: engaged in capitalist consumer culture, invested in national ideologies of patriotism,

and adequately educated in cultural values. My dissertation is most deeply concerned with the *practice* of those beliefs in the American Dream as constructed by the Armed Services Editions, Book-of-the-Month Club, G.I. Bill Housing and Education benefits, and middlebrow literature. In the two main parts of this chapter, what matters *more* than the ideas promoted through middlebrow print culture is the ways in which individuals and communities adopted and embodied these recommendations in their attempts to secure the middle-class, white, identities assured them by middlebrow institutions like the ASEs, the GI bill housing and education benefits, and the Book-of-the-Month Club.

In this chapter, I sought to demonstrate through the material conditions of the postwar U.S. how the middlebrow is necessarily and constantly evolving as an institution for education in a particular kind of consumerism, and how the middlebrow came to be situated as a dominant culture in the U.S. in part through the training of and entitlements due to servicemembers and veterans. I argue that the final evolution of the American Dream is executed and evident in the lived experience and images of the single-family suburban home. In order to truly understand the extent to which the "fiction" of advertising and middlebrow taste "seeps quietly and continuously into reality," it is necessary to take a closer look at one (type of) suburban community in particular, and the ways in which it was promoted, advertised, furnished, and lived in—to this end, I analyzed Levitt & Sons' Levittown (and in particular, the evolution of their kitchen design) as both representative and innovative, as well as advertisements from *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine. The influence of Levittown on the broader American middlebrow imagination is evident in advertisements for products seeking to mimic what Levitt claimed to sell: the privilege of belonging both racially and socioeconomically to the middle- or upper-

middle-class. At the core of this image of belonging is the driving motivator of the American Dream, which I have argued is fundamentally a desire for security.

In the following chapter, I will examine two middlebrow novels in conversation in order to clarify the particularly gendered aspects of the American Dream, even in its more basic form at the time the novels were published (1925). 1925 serves as a springboard year, after which the middlebrow increases its stronghold on American culture. The great expansion of the middle class after WWII (discussed in this chapter), created a wider middlebrow public which is continuing to impact us today. In my analysis of *The Great Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, I hope to clarify that the texts we teach, and the ones which are forgotten, demonstrate that discrimination against "middlebrow" culture, literature, and lifestyles pervades even the most banal of choices. In this chapter, I argued that the G.I. bill Education and Housing benefits solidified the imagery promoted by earlier middlebrow institutions like the Armed Services Editions and the Book-of-the-Month Club, and made real the "fiction [which] seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (Anderson 40). The G.I. Bill Education and Housing benefits impacted the cultural imagination to the extent that it created an enduring image of the American Dream as inherently middlebrow—a Dream that continues to have a significant legacy. The imperatives of this dream—consumerism, a particular kind of education, and ownership—continue to impact the ways in which advertising and legislation manipulate the "American" imagination.

CHAPTER 3: An Etiquette

The Bookshelf of Middle(brow) America: How *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Makes Clear *Gatsby*'s American Dream

What ails it, fundamentally, is the plain fact that it is simply a story… "The Great Gatsby," a far inferior story at bottom, is plainly the product of a sound and stable talent, conjured into being by hard work.
H.L. Menken on *Gatsby*[147] (1925)

[I am] now reading the great American novel (at last!) and I want to know if there are—or will be—others and if you know the young woman, who must be a genius.
Edith Wharton on *Blondes*[148] (1925)

Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has enjoyed a privileged place in both the U.S. academic and cultural canons, and its impressive legacy hardly reflects its initial commercial failure. When the novel first hit bookstores across the U.S. on April 10th, 1925, it sold far fewer copies than Fitzgerald had anticipated. Widely influential contemporary critics like H.L. Menken described delivered via book review a series of backhanded compliments to Fitzgerald's writing style. Those who had loved *This Side of Paradise* bemoaned Fitzgerald's new, darker outlook on the flapper culture his previous novels had reveled in. His personal reputation as a moody drunk (bestowed on him in large part by his longtime frenemy and competitor Ernest Hemingway) only served to further slow sales. Eventually, as booksellers' rumor has it, the novel was left to collect dust until its posthumous revival by the Armed Services Editions. Anita Loos's wildly successful novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, was published serially in the women's fashion magazine, *Harper's Bazar,* between March and August of 1925. The novel was published by Boni & Liveright the same year (1925), and it was an instant commercial sensation. Contemporary fans

[147] Menken's review of *The Great Gatsby, Chicago Sunday Tribune*. May 3, 1925
[148] Edith Wharton (personal letter), qtd Susan Hegemen, "Taking *Blondes* Seriously," *American Literary History* 7.3 (1995). P 525.

of *Blondes* included James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, and Edith Wharton, who praised it as the "next Great American Novel." Its praise was equally balanced, however, by scathing critique by William Faulkner, H.L. Menken, Q.D. Leavis, and Wyndham Lewis. Gertrude Stein was one of Loos's harshest critics and allegedly claimed that Loos was not particularly worth reading (Barrett-Fox 236). By contrast, Stein's contemporary, Joyce, thought Loos was very much worth reading. Because of his failing eyesight, Joyce had to restrict his reading while writing *Finnegans Wake*, but he claimed in a letter that he had spent precious hours and energy "reclining on a sofa and reading *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* for three whole days" (*Letters* I:246). Loos's success—and particularly her *commercial* success—represented the epitome of that very anxiety which motivated so much criticism of the middlebrow by cultural critics and High Modernists alike.

This chapter considers the cultural, commercial, and literary conditions of the production and legacies of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in conversation with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to demonstrate that the novels together make clear the imperatives and limitations of the American Dream as later constructed in the postwar period. I acknowledge that an analysis of two middlebrow novels from 1925—a full two decades before most of the other texts I examine in this dissertation—may seem disembodied from my discussion of the American Dream in the WWII- and postwar-eras. I argue, however, that reading a widely recognized "Great American Novel" in conversation with the now-obscure feminist comedy, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Anita Loos demonstrates that the impossibility of the Dream is in fact its most appealing promise.

I argue in the introduction that in order to truly understand the significance of the Armed Services Editions project and the GI bill benefits to the solidification of the American Dream, it

is necessary to first understand how the United States came to be situated as a middlebrow culture. Cultural criticisms from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835) to Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things* (2003) have repeatedly claimed that the United States has been a capitalist, materialist, and consumer-driven culture essentially from its inception. In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I have sought to articulate the connections between middlebrow culture and practice in the U.S.—in particular, I have demonstrated the ways in which the particular vision of the American Dream articulated in the introduction is constructed by middlebrow literary institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Armed Services Editions, together with legislation and informal social enforcement to produce a consumer-driven, middlebrow American Dream. The previous two chapters examine, chronologically, the measurable effects of middlebrow culture and institutions on the material development of the American Dream, from the Council on Books in Wartime's Armed Services Editions texts to the particular implementation of the G.I. bill Education and Housing provisions.

In Chapter One, I argue that servicemembers' responses to Betty Smith's articulation of the American Dream in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* demonstrates its rootedness in the middlebrow as well as the vital threat the middlebrow ethic poses to the paradigm of military masculinity (another essential, foundational aspect of the Dream). The letters also demonstrate that the aspects of the Dream most treasured by servicemembers were the middlebrow value of *striving* (which for Francie is executed through literacy), and the rootedness and belonging symbolized by the Tree of Heaven. In Chapter Two, I examine two sites of middlebrow American Dream attainment—the university and the suburban home—to demonstrate how the ideals of the Dream formerly encapsulated in literature come to be evident in the lived experience of the suburbanite (veteran and civilian) and displayed in the suburban home. As I

explain in that chapter, higher education undergoes fundamental shifts in the postwar era, in terms of culture and in the focus and function of General Education curricula. *The Great Gatsby*, a blockbuster failure before its circulation as an Armed Services Edition, experiences its revival and begins being thought of as a "Great American Novel" in the postwar period when, I argue, the middlebrow imperatives of the American Dream are made concrete.

As I argue in Chapter One, the Council on Books in Wartime, like the Book-of-the-Month Club, was essentially a middlebrow institution aimed at entertaining and educating servicemen and women overseas during WWII. In fact, the Council, whose motto was "Books are the Weapons for the War of Ideas," was in many ways related to the Book-of-the-Month Club, and shared a selection committee member (Cole). In the previous two chapters of the dissertation, I demonstrated how the middlebrow American Dream is constructed by the critical intersection of middlebrow institutions, military masculinity, and finally, legal and social enforcement of perceived American values. My definition of the middlebrow as simultaneously an *aesthetic*, an *ethic*, and *etiquette* (or behavioral performance) necessarily situates the concept of a middlebrow American Dream firmly in an understanding of the economic and commercial imperatives of 20th century U.S. culture. The nineteenth century's obsession with the accumulation and display of "things" established the fertile ground wherein early 20th century middlebrow culture and its inherent materialism could thrive. The most basic elements of the middlebrow ethic are imitation and aspiration—especially to wealth, prestige, acceptance, and notoriety. Susan Hegemen suggests that in the early twentieth century, "the middle class began to act upon the notion that the products of culture could be used as commodities for the creation of social status[149]" (Hegemen 531). In short, to aspire to mass culture is to aspire to the possession

[149] This claim is based on Hegemen's understanding of Janice Radway's study of the Book-of-the-Month Club, an accepted pillar of Middlebrow sensibility and which was also first established in 1925. See Hegemen, "Taking

and display of *things as a sign of wealth and culture*. Bill Brown's conception of the "thingness" of American literature and culture suggests that American identity is in large part constituted by our accumulation and *display* of things. In Chapter Two, I note that *bookaflage*—the use of books as objects to display one's cultural, racial, sexual, gendered, and classed identities—demonstrates the very impulses Hegemen and Brown discuss. Brown's analysis also bridges the apparent gap between material, commercial 'things' and the power and meaning of the 'things' of literature—such as the formal and mechanical strategies of "rhetorical grammars" and "logic reference" employed by writers in order to make things "real" in literature (Brown 16-17).

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* grapple with the 'thingness' of American identity and the Americanness of 'things' by centering the protagonists' engagement with material objects in the fabrication and maintenance of their identities as well as through the narratives' rhetorical strategies. The middlebrow hero(ine)s of these stories make clear that, as Brown suggests, we are not only motivated but also *manipulated* by 'things,' which "captivat[e] humans with the mesmeric power of their aesthetic value" (33). Thus, in the early 20th century there begin to appear protagonists like Anita Loos's Lorelei Lee, who instructs her maid to read and summarize books for her so that she can appear to have read them[150] in cocktail party conversation, and Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, whose library full of "absolutely real" books with uncut pages[151] astounds his owl-eyed guest (*Gatsby* 46). Although the titles are withheld

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Blondes Seriously" (1995); Interestingly, Guillory argues that it was not until the 1970s that wealthy Americans could truly signal their status through consumerism alone—a claim which could complicate aspects of my argument, but which I will address in my discussion of the *foundation* of middle(brow) America.

[150] Lorelei tells us: "I decided not to read the book by Mr. Cellini. I mean it was quite amuseing in spots because it was really quite riskay but the spots were not so close together and I never seem to like to always be hunting clear through a book for the spots I am looking for, especially when there are really not so many spots that seem to be amuseing after all. So I did not waste my time on it but this morning I told Lulu to let all of the house work go and spend the day reading a book entitled "Lord Jim" *and then tell me all about it, so that I would improve my mind* while Gerry is away" (*Blondes* 13, emphasis added)

[151] The owl-eyed guest had expected shelves full of books of "a nice durable cardboard," and is both amazed and impressed to find the books "absolutely real," and in fact marvels that Gatsby "[k]new when to stop" the façade, by

from the reader, the books which fill up the libraries of both Lorelei and Gatsby do not even need to be *named*, let alone *read*—they serve only to demonstrate that both Lorelei and Gatsby are surrounded by products of culture which are slowly but surely gaining commercial value. Gatsby and Lorelei's *unread* books serve a primarily farcical purpose in their novels, but Nicola Humble argues that the bookshelf of the middlebrow hero(ine) generally "tells us a great deal about the… reader the middlebrow novel has in mind" (Humble 8). This ideal reader "is not committed to middlebrow novels, but ranges widely in her interests, encompassing many genres of literature, and combining high and lowbrow interests in a daring disregard for conventional judgements. She is voracious in her reading, and responds to literature with a visceral immediacy" (Humble 8). Gatsby's famously unread books demonstrate the middlebrow character of the novel by foregrounding one of the primary modernist anxieties about the middlebrow—namely, that by the second decade of the twentieth century, the cultural capital of books has already started to become their primary function. It is not necessary for Gatsby or Lorelei to read the books, only to demonstrate that they *have* them.

This chapter examines what some have argued—and I contend—is the first year of the height of middlebrow influence (1925-1950). In conducting readings of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *The Great Gatsby*, I argue that the materialism and consumerism both encouraged and critiqued by these novels grounds the American Dream steadily in the realm of the unattainable. Although *Gatsby* and *Blondes* have been analyzed in scholarship about *Blondes*—ostensibly to ground the text in a familiar literary tradition—and briefly in discussions of *Gatsby*'s commercial production, the two have not often been closely analyzed in conversation with one another. The pair is important not only because of their opposing literary histories, but

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not "cut[ting] the pages" (46). Although the books are not cardboard fakes, that Gatsby "didn't cut the pages" proves he never read the books—pages must be cut in order to open a book to read it (46).

also because studying the two together helps identify the particular values absorbed and condoned by the concept of the American Dream and American culture, and those rejected. *Blondes*, as I will demonstrate, is problematic within the context of the American Dream and American identity because, although she reinvents herself, Lorelei is presented as blatant, unrepentant, and successful; her "achievement" of the American Dream is unsatisfactory because she seems to succeed by luck, not merit. By contrast, Gatsby is beloved because he tried and *failed*, and his tragic ending resonates with the sentiment that the Dream is elusive and even dangerous. In *Gatsby*, women like Lorelei (as I will argue, Myrtle) face tragic ends. In *Blondes*, "bad" women come out on top. The imperatives of the American Dream—economic, social, and political security; the ability to spend and consume freely and without worry; the ability to share one's gifts (whether with one's family or the broader community)—are centered, troubled, and perpetuated by these novels.

I. "A Girl Like I": Lorelei Lee as Gatsby's Aspirational Foil

The year 1925 saw the rise of popular "smart" magazines like *The New Yorker*, the publication of both a commercial sensation, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Anita Loos, and one of the Great American Novels, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and marks the beginning of what is considered the "height of the middlebrow." In order to fully understand how and why the imperatives and limitations of the American Dream become clear through this narrative pairing, it is helpful to consider the purposes these novels were assumed to serve in their year of publication. *The Great Gatsby* is the story of a nouveau-riche, self-made Long Islander who had (re)invented himself at the age of seventeen, and whose love for a long-lost-flame results in his gruesome downfall. Fitzgerald had already enjoyed success in his wildly popular bildungsroman, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), which some have argued effectively created the new image of

femininity known as the flapper girl. Although *Gatsby* was vastly different in tone, Fitzgerald anticipated greater success than the novel ended up enjoying. He had reportedly believed that his novel would serve as a warning of the unsustainability of flapper hedonism—a message none of his fans wanted to hear, apparently.

Unlike Fitzgerald, Anita Loos did not view herself as particularly "literary," and thus the success she enjoyed appeared—in the words of her protagonist—to "just keep happening" without much obvious effort. Loos was an actress, screen writer, and producer, who in 1912 became the first female staff writer in Hollywood. She upheld sexist distinctions between men and women in her speech[152], but hardly in her professional life—though she insisted that *Blondes* was *not* a "serious piece of writing" and that she herself was not a "writer," she enjoyed success as the author of both *Blondes* and its sequel, as well as their stage and screen adaptations. Loos claims to have hastily penned *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* while on a train en route to Hollywood as a satire intended to tease her friend, author and literary critic H.L. Menken, who was (from Loos's perspective), easily taken with blonde women. In her introduction to the novel, Loos claims that her protagonist, Lorelei Lee, reflects the "lowest form of life in America," that of the "dumb blonde" whose only means of support is the latest man she can convince to pay for her wares.

Considering the 1920s' attitude toward female writers, laborers, and consumers, Lorelei represents anxieties of prostitution associated with women in the workforce as a 'professional

[152] In her discussion of Lorelei in Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as "blonde archetype," Susan Hegemen reminds us that the "[a]dvertising of the period supported the redefinition of women's labor within the home to include the work of possessing and maintaining sufficient quantities of what popular writers liked to refer to as 'It' (sexual charisma), to attract and hold the attention of their husbands" (Hegemen 535). She associates this interest in women's "sexual charisma" with what Fitzgerald called "the '20s' 'universal preoccupation with sex'" (Hegemen 535). This fascination with women's social-sexual behavior was not new to the twenties, but certainly escalated within that decade. The level of scrutiny executed by such magazines reveals not only a preoccupation with sex, gender, and sexuality, but an anxiety about social and sexual authenticity as well.

lady,' a (self-professed) 'authoress,' and as an avid consumer of commercial goods. Consider Hegemen's evaluations of the term 'professional lady': "When we remember that, in Lorelei's origin story, her seduction by Mr. Jennings exactly coincided with her entry into the work world—culminating in her opaque status as a 'professional lady'—we can see this erasure of sex in connection with, or even as an extension of, the erasure of both work and agency. Indeed, if Lorelei is a professional *'kept woman,'* then, we may say*, sex is her business*. More generally, however, this connection of sex and labor may be related to *an ideological transformation in the '20s* in which *sex was, in essence, being redefined as women's work*" (Hegemen 534, emphasis added). Similarly, Sarah Churchwell argues that in the early twentieth century, feminine labor outside the home, especially labor of *production*, such as writing, was conceived of as potentially (if not innately) sexual. Churchwell notes that "[i]n the 1920s a professional woman writer still risked being perceived as unnatural or deviant for writing, and feminine labor and self-advertisement more generally had always to brave association with the promiscuity and commerce of prostitution" (Churchwell 139). According to Churchwell, "Loos negotiates this landmine in two ways: she deprecates *Blondes* as conventionally feminine, infantile, childish, frivolous, private, and little, and she represents writing as not being work. Although she did not always disparage the result, Loos habitually downplayed the *labor* of writing" (Churchwell 139). *Blondes* thus presents an interesting case wherein the novelist and protagonist must negotiate similar challenges, almost simultaneously. Both Loos and Lorelei shrug off the "*labor* of writing" as a way of deflecting from the cultural affiliation of women's professional productive capacity with prostitution; Loos "represents writing as not being work"; meanwhile, Lorelei claims that writing is a skill which "you do not have to learn or practice" (Churchwell 139, *Blondes* 6).

At its most bare, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is not a wholly unfamiliar story: Theodore Dreiser's realist novel *Sister Carrie* depicts a similarly limited set of options for impoverished women looking for material wealth and a more exciting life. Yet, Loos's *Blondes* does not afford its protagonists the same sympathy—Lorelei Lee is an uncultured young country bumpkin from Arkansas who leaves her small town on a quest for fame, fun, and a rich husband. The narrative's first-person, epistolary form immediately problematizes Lorelei's contradictory claims about her 'niceness' and her suitors' interest in her 'brains.' The overt exclusion of certain, possibly scandalous, details of her personal life from her diary evidences the artificiality of Lorelei's persona, constructed not only for use in her 'real' performance within the universe Loos constructs for her, but in her performance on the page as well; Lorelei performs not only for other characters within the novel, but also for the unsuspecting reader. The epistolary form often implies a certain degree of confidence between the narrator and the reader, but it also has the potential to be perhaps the *most* performative genre, because it allows the narrator to curate her experience as it is presented to the reader. We, the readers, are given neither the omnipotence of omniscient third-person narration nor the familiarity of a true first-person perspective (in which the reader is privy also to the narrator's thoughts), but rather are presented with what can be interpreted as the *most unreliable* type of narration. Lorelei's experience is mediated entirely through her own words and is based on her own reporting and construction. We, the readers, are reminded of her unreliability by recurring malapropism ("Eyeful Tower" for the Eiffel Tower, "Robber" for a Frenchman named Robert, from whom *she* attempts to steal) and frequent cacography ("Froyd" instead of Freud, for example)[153]. As Laurie J.C. Cella asserts, "[w]hat

[153] Whether these misspellings are true cacography, intended to make fun of the narrator's lack of intelligence, or are simply a distraction for the reader (directing our attention away from her genius by presenting apparent "evidence" of her stupidity) and part of Lorelei's constructed persona is unclear and, frankly, irrelevant. One could argue, for example, that inconsistencies in spelling (such as her use of deceive, which is misspelled initially as "deceeve," but

makes Lorelei Lee…so appealing is her ability to manipulate her own image and effectively become mistress of her own grand confidence game" (Cella 47). Her obliviousness around male characters is not evidence of her lack of intellectual ability, but rather evidence of her possession and use of it. Similarly, Lorelei's written mistakes are "purposeful misnomer[s] that elicit more than just another blonde joke," but rather play the same tricks on her reader is she does on the men she cons out of jewelry and money (Cella 48). Lorelei's identity is entirely reliant on her ability to manipulate others by appearing to be easily used: the very name, "Lorelei," is bestowed on her by a judge after he acquits her of attempted murder.

The development of both *Blondes* and its protagonist can be read as a feminist quest for security in a wildly unstable capitalist market wherein women had few to no economic safeguards—although Loos herself would resent that reading. And while *Gatsby* takes as its subject different aspects of east coast upper-crust society, the social exchanges between East and West Egg are no less tenuous than Lorelei's romp through Europe. Gatsby and Lorelei's fabricated identities are reinforced by the protagonists' engagements with a variety of forms of print culture, most notably, the "smart" magazine. Central to the middlebrow culture and aesthetic is the magazine—particularly "smart" magazines like *Harper's Bazar*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New Yorker*, which published gossip, fashion, local and international news, and short and serialized fiction. *The New Yorker* in particular, Hammill explains, has been associated "firmly with the 'new middlebrow culture' which appeared in the interwar years" and "'was not synonymous with mass culture but used the productive capacities of mass culture to capitalize on the new and growing obsession with cultural legitimacy" (Hammill 18). Middlebrow-affiliated magazines, unlike "middlebrow literature," *was* a new phenomenon in the early twentieth

then later spelled correctly) are evidence of the performativity of Lorelei's character—but these logocentric excavations, while entertaining, really lead nowhere (54).

century, and arose out of new innovations in printing technologies. Hammill notes that weekly magazines attempted to create a happy medium between the fast-paced daily newspapers and the slower monthly high-fashion periodicals (like *Harper's Bazar*). This combination of slower social and political commentary and quicker fashion and lifestyle analysis resulted in "a delicate blending of such apparently incompatible ingredients as sentiment and sophistication, optimism and disillusionment, frivolity and engagement, conservatism and subversion" (Hammill 31). This new print culture greatly influenced the literature produced in the 1920s by foregrounding the shifting cultural, social, and political priorities of the West.

Both *Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* relied on readers' understanding of pop culture products of the day—namely women's fashion magazines and, in the case of *Gatsby*'s Myrtle Wilson, gossip magazines. The products Lorelei accumulates to construct her identity are often the very same products advertised opposite the pages of her story in *Harper's Bazar*, demonstrating a unique dialectic between middlebrow novel, consumer, and print culture. Loos effectively produces a consumer of goods which are literally advertised on the pages on which *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* first appeared serially in *Harper's Bazar* in 1925. The 1924-1925 volumes of *Harper's Bazar* followed a predictable pattern of advertisements: the first page features a full-spread advertisement for Tiffany's fine jewelry, followed by twenty or so pages of advertisements for travel companies, hotels, beach and ski resorts, and cruises; ten or so pages of advertisements for children's and professional schools (including a regular and rather large ad for "commercial art" school); after this, there usually appear a few pages instructing readers "where to shop" in New York, Philadelphia, and Paris; advertisements for various Ritz hotel locations; and finally, the remaining hundred or so pages intermingle full-page advertisements for beauty products, Rolls-Royce and Lincoln cars, purebred dogs, and dress patterns with short

stories and excerpts from novels. Each issue between 1924 and the end of 1925 boasts at least four substantial pieces of reading material. These excerpts typically begin on full, two-page spreads complete with illustrations, and continue much later in the magazine, where the words are crowded by advertisements for cold creams, double-chin cures, silk hosiery, and even more luxury automobiles. Tucked between a piece on "Knickers and Make-Up" and Dodge and Marmon luxury car advertisements, the excerpt from Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* offers readers a caricature of the imagined 'frivolous' reader, herself. One could imagine Lorelei thumbing through the pages of *Harper's Bazar*, taking note of the titles and authors of its featured fiction, but glossing over the literature in favor of more 'educational' and 'refined'—that is, commercially-oriented—material. Thus, the advertisements framing the serialized novel help inform the reader not only of what they should aspire to purchase, what they *desire* materially, but also sway the reader by way of the novel's finely dressed, well-perfumed protagonist.

Gatsby's engagement with middlebrow print culture, by contrast, relies heavily on scandal magazines and the popular hard-boiled mysteries of the 1920s. As in *Blondes*, the novel's engagement with advertisement and print culture is primarily framed through *Gatsby*'s female characters, demonstrating (as I have discussed in previous chapters) the problematic feminization of middlebrow institutions. *Gatsby*'s Myrtle Wilson, the character most closely associated with ephemeral print culture, presents an alternative interpretation of women like Lorelei Lee. Where Lorelei engages in the consumerist imperatives of advertising culture, Myrtle is deeply attached to and by extension defined by the gossip magazine *Town Tattle*—a reference to the actual *Town Topics*, a New York based gossip magazine[154]. A precise blend of

[154] See Sharon Hamilton, "Gossip Magazines in Fitzgerald" (2010)

hypersexuality and mindless consumerism, Myrtle represents the worst kind of woman from the perspective of 1920s sensibility. Her consumption of gossip magazines like *Town Tattle* while also engaging in the behavior often reported in these magazines presents her as shallow and witless. Myrtle is thus the kind of woman that must be "watched" (as evidenced by the watchful eyes of T.J. Eckleburg). Hamilton explains that "Myrtle's stopping to buy magazines and a dog in Tom's company was not, within the new historical reality, either safe or anonymous… Tom was a member of the 400, a representative in the novel of the people most likely to be reported on in *Town Topics*—and to be blackmailed by it. He is also a fictitious representative of Long Islanders, who were particular victims of the [*Town Topics*] pages" (Hamilton 42). Myrtle's behavior—and Tom's lack of discretion—appear even more reckless given Tom has already appeared in the papers with other women before this affair. Jordan Baker explains to Nick that very early in Daisy and Tom's marriage, "Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night, and ripped a front wheel off his car. *The girl who was with him got into the papers, too*, because her arm was broken—she was one of the chambermaids in the Santa Barbara hotel" (*Gatsby* 77). In fact, the Buchanans are such a high-profile couple that before reuniting with Daisy, Gatsby "read a Chicago paper for years just on the chance of catching a glimpse of Daisy's name" (*Gatsby* 79). These allusions to gossip culture and specific gossip magazines of his day suggest that Fitzgerald understood gossip magazines like *Town Topics* as "a tool for blackmail and the destruction of lives" (Hamilton 43). Myrtle's death provides a segue from the consumer of vapid gossip to its subject.

By contrast, Daisy is—in almost every conceivable way—the absolute ideal woman of the 1920s. Women (like Lorelei and Myrtle) want to *be* her and men (like all the men in *Blondes*, rich men like Tom, and 'pretenders' like *Gatsby*) want to *be with*—or, more accurately,

possess—her, both because of her own status and the status she achieves for her partner. Although she is significant, Daisy is not really a character in this novel, but an object. Daisy, like books in the 1920s, does not need to be read, understood, interpreted, or quoted correctly. She simply must be *possessed*. Although she is Myrtle's opposite in many ways, Daisy is also incredibly dependent on the newspaper culture to which Myrtle's attention is constantly turned. While Myrtle strives to emulate the image of the ideal woman presented on the pages of newspapers and magazines, Daisy *is* the image emulated, and without them, she loses much of her significance. When Daisy and Gatsby finally reunite, Nick explains to the reader that Gatsby had "read a Chicago paper for years just on the chance of catching a glimpse of Daisy's name" (79). Similarly, early into her marriage with Tom, Daisy learns of Tom's infidelity because of a newspaper story—an incredibly public way to learn such intimate news[155].

The newspaper serves as an interesting intermediary between the highly feminized realms of gossip and advertising to the more masculinized genres of hard-boiled mystery and crime. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Gatsby will not escape media scrutiny, and that his budding fame will become a problem for him, rather than an asset to help him woo Daisy. His wild parties have facilitated "notoriety, spread about by hundreds who had accepted his hospitality and so become authorities upon his past," and thus increased rumors "until he fell just short of becoming big news" (*Gatsby* 97). What finally catapults him into the arena of "big news," however, is the death of Myrtle, followed by his own murder and Wilson's suicide. Nick claims that "[m]ost of those [newspaper] reports were a nightmare—grotesque, circumstantial, eager, and untrue" (*Gatsby* 163). Like Myrtle and Daisy, Gatsby, too, is created in part by and

[155] See *Gatsby*, Chapter IV, in which Jordan Baker explains Daisy and Tom's marriage to Nick. Jordan explains that early in their marriage, "Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night, and ripped a front wheel off his car. The girl who was with him got into the papers, too, because her arm was broken" (77).

endures in newspaper culture. In fact, it is the Chicago papers which inform Gatsby's estranged father—Mr. Henry C. Gatz—of his son's death (*Gatsby* 167). The final chapter is saturated with Nick's anxieties about newspapers—who reads them, who does not, and how to keep Gatsby's funeral details out of them so as not to "draw a sightseeing crowd" (*Gatsby* 169). Although the newspaper reports are not given in the novel, many scholars have noted the ways in which *Gatsby* itself acts as a backstory to the grotesque and sensationalized crimes of gossip magazines and newspapers of the day. In many ways, *Gatsby* provides an answer for the questions: How does something like this happen anyway? What motivates someone to do something like _________? In fact, the novel's *tell-don't-show* narrative form works much like a gossip column itself, as does Nick's appallingly long list of the guests who had attended Gatsby's parties in the summer of 1922[156]. While *Gatsby* relies heavily on the genre of the hard-boiled mystery for the development of its final double-murder-suicide plot, however, a knowledge of the real case which inspired this twist is not essential to the readers' understanding.

Though much of magazine culture at this time was presented as recreation and entertainment, the cornerstone of the middlebrow institution was a preoccupation with manners and norms, which "smart" magazines, scandal magazines, and hard-boiled mysteries all provided. The generic experiments these novels engage in demonstrate one of the essential middlebrow aspects of the American Dream—while particular *products* can never *be* the Dream, it is clear through these novels, as well as in the housing phenomenon of the 1950s discussed in Chapter Two, that an individual's attempt at achieving the American Dream necessarily involves aspirational consumerism in its construction. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, reading these novels together demonstrates the primacy of "things" to the American Dream. To

[156] See *Gatsby* 61-63

better understand how "things" manipulate the Dream, and in part become *part of* the Dream itself, it is necessary to examine both the "things" of the novels and the novels *as* "things."

II. The 'Things' of the Novels: THE NOVELS' AMERICAN DREAMS

To truly understand the danger of *Blondes* and the draw of *Gatsby* as middlebrow novels, it is necessary to examine more closely the particular pictures of the American Dream presented in each novel. On the surface, the novels' cores seem similar—the protagonists invent themselves out of nothing, climb to prominence on the East Coast out of nowhere (but actually, out of middle America[157]), and attempt to be accepted into the fold of old money society through marriage. Not only do both protagonists fabricate their identities (including their names—Lorelei was Minnie, Jay Gatsby was Jimmy Gatz), but both also seek to achieve their status through the accumulation of material things. There are several distinctions between the novels, of course, but one distinction in particular separates them immensely—and that is the danger in their performative projects.

Gatsby and Lorelei embody the ideal middlebrow hero(ine) in part because of their engagement with certain cultural norms and institutions of the 1920s—in particular, their attention to the emerging "flapper" aesthetic, and the anxieties about morality that accompanied this new social emergence. Both Gatsby and Lorelei are particularly "preoccup[ied] with aspects of class and manners," both of which are essential to their carefully constructed identities, and which are generally considered the cornerstones of middlebrow social concern (Humble 11). As Sarah Churchwell notes, the image of the flapper girl of the 1920s represented a new "perilous femininity" which, now based on ephemeral consumer products rather than one's character, could be stripped away as quickly (or perhaps *more* quickly) than it could be gained. Although

[157] "James Gatz of North Dakota" (Fitzgerald, 98) and Minnie (Lorelei), "a little girl from Little Rock," Arkansas (Loos, ix)

Churchwell develops this definition of flapper femininity to explain the character of Rosalind in Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920)—a character many, including Zelda Fitzgerald, have claimed to be the original "flapper girl"—this description applies to both Gatsby and Lorelei as well. Lorelei's careful attention to manners, etiquette, and fashion—though comical—highlight both the ephemeral quality of this new femininity and the necessity of securing it through one's appearance. Lorelei is well adept at constructing the new social persona required by the changing social norms of the Jazz Age. Similarly, Gatsby is obsessed with both appearances and mannerisms, but falls short of acquiring the mastery of façade which Lorelei manages. In fact, one of the first things Nick notices about Gatsby is that his "elaborate formality of speech" is just a note shy of being "absurd" (*Gatsby* 49). Both Gatsby's and Lorelei's stories are those of continual and precarious climbs up the social ladder, but the two differ notably. While Gatsby falls, Lorelei soars. This is entirely due to the degree to which each character adapts—Gatsby never wavers, while Lorelei is in constant flux, always changing and adapting just ahead of the world around her. In both novels, an essential piece of each protagonists' constructed persona—and thus, the key to their dreams/ desires—are their names.

a. "Aspiration": The Immateriality of Gatsby's Dream

The Great Gatsby is the story of a man infatuated by the dream of his own greatness, and the unfathomable impact of that dream not only on the man himself, but on those around him; it is, of course, the story of love lost and sought after again. And yet, this is not what the story is about at all. Thematically speaking, *Gatsby* is a story of the unfulfilled striving that characterizes Fitzgerald's view of America and the unachievable, ephemeral, impossible American Dream. Jay Gatsby invents himself twice. First, as a product of his own imagination and belief in the glorious "drums of his destiny," and secondly, as a wealthy man capable of (re)attracting Daisy

Buchannan, a long-lost flame, who would complete his picture-perfect conception of himself. Gatsby's origin (story) and the plot of the novel are difficult to pin down, in part because events are told in third-person limited *memory* (meaning the events described have all already happened) and because Gatsby is so elusive a character, even to the narrator. When, late in the novel, a reporter appears on Gatsby's doorstep eager to discover the truth of his background, Nick feels compelled to "explod[e] those first wild rumors about [Gatsby's] antecedents, which weren't even faintly true" (101). The first wild rumor Nick feels the need to expel for the reader is Gatsby's name, which is not "Jay Gatsby" but rather "Jimmy Gatz." Nick explains that Gatsby had changed his name "at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career—when he saw Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor over the most insidious flat on Lake Superior" (98). Thus, we learn that although Gatby's house and wealth were strategically accumulated to dazzle Daisy, he had begun cultivating his persona before he met her. About the name, Gatsby, Nick muses:

> I suppose he'd had the name ready for a long time, even then. His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old-boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (*Gatsby* 98)

Nick here also seems like the kind of middlebrow person one would expect to narrate this particular middlebrow story. Although Nick has known Gatsby for only a few weeks, he projects onto him an origin story as fantastical as those Gatsby himself invents, albeit in a different vein. Nick imagines Gatsby as both a Platonic ideal—the idea that ideas (in this case, Gatsby's persona) encapsulate the true and essential nature of things—and as a son of God who is "about His Father's business," two very different philosophies of self.

Nick's assertion that Gatsby is faithful to his conception of himself "to the end" reinforces the contradictory qualities of Gatsby's highly mutable nature, stubborn personality, and naiveté. Although he is an impossibly wealthy, flashy man whom people admire, he is unable to change and adapt, which leads inevitably to his downfall. Nick's supposition that Gatsby had thought up this new name as an adolescent complicates our understanding of Gatsby's identity as inherently connected to his idea of Daisy, but also sheds light on the construction of his elaborate façade. Unable even to accept his "shiftless and unsuccessful" parents as his own, how can he be fulfilled by the "real" person Daisy turns out to be? Nick is convinced that Gatsby's fixation on the past is motivated by a desire to "recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy" because "[h]is life had been confused and distorted since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he would find out what that thing was" (*Gatsby* 110). The moment when Gatsby's life supposedly becomes "confused and distorted" is his first kiss with Daisy—not, it is interesting to note, his first sexual encounter, but his first romantic encounter with this particular girl. Gatsby hesitates in the moment before their kiss, believing that "when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God… At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete" (*Gatsby* 110-111). Thus, although his *name* does not originate with Daisy, the "incarnation" of Jay Gatsby is "complete" at their kiss, and is thus the image of himself which Gatsby attempts fruitlessly to recreate throughout the novel. When Jordan tells Nick about Daisy's hysteric fit on her wedding day—drunk and sobbing in the bathtub, clinging to a letter from Gatsby, which disintegrated as it got wet and crumpled in her fist—it becomes clear to Nick how Gatsby could imagine Daisy still true to him after all this time and despite her

marriage to Tom. It is for this reason Nick assumes Gatsby must feel at the moment of his death that "he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (161). Although the name "Gatsby" had existed before Daisy, the completed fiction cannot exist without her.

It is the unattainable dream Gatsby fabricates which both makes him a sympathetic character and identifies, for Nick, something uniquely American in his efforts to achieve it. As Nick continues to get to know Gatsby, we come to a moment wherein performance and truth collide: Gatsby's military service. Gatsby attempts to define himself in part by his military service in the war[158] It is clear in Nick's conversation with Gatsby that the military masculinity Gatsby attempts to realize is ultimately unsatisfying. Gatsby describes the start of WWII as "a great relief," not unusual within the framework of military masculinity, which presents military service as paradigmatic of manhood (66). In the same breath, however, he makes clear that his concept of military masculinity culminates in a form of national martyrdom:

> 'Then came the war, old sport. It was a great relief, and I tried very hard to die, but I seemed to bear and enchanted life. I accepted a commission as first lieutenant when it began. In the Argonne Forest I took two machine-gun detachments so far forward that there was a half-mile gap on either side of us where the infantry couldn't advance. We stayed there two days and two nights, a hundred and thirty men with sixteen Lewis guns, and when the infantry came up at last they found the insignia of three German divisions among the piles of the dead. I was promoted to be a major, and every Allied government gave me a decoration—even Montenegro, little Montenegro down on the Adriatic Sea!' (*Gatsby* 66)

After speedily detailing his war story[159], Gatsby pulls his valor metal out of his pocket and shows it to Nick. This metal, inscribed, "Major Jay Gatsby… For Valour Extraordinary," and the

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[158] As discussed in Chapters One and Two, this is an attempt to align himself with the military masculine, which changes significantly by the start of WWII.

[159] Nick's impression of Gatsby's valor story is fascination and awe—and yet, perhaps incredulity. He describes it as "like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines" (66). Gatsby is, himself, a sort of middlebrow medium of information.

photograph of Gatsby at Oxford convince Nick that the entirety of Gatsby's fantastical tail is true—from his origins in the "Middle West" of San Francisco[160], to his "liv[ing] like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe," to his grandeur in East Egg (*Gatsby* 65-67). Jordan Baker, Daisy's friend and Nick's sometimes-lover, later tells him that Daisy and Gatsby met in Louisville, near Camp Taylor. Camp Taylor, where Gatsby supposedly took his commission as a first lieutenant in the army, is the same former military base and training camp where Fitzgerald himself prepared for deployment. This particular military base reinforces the novel's broad appeal, however, by situating Gatsby simultaneously as a larger-than-life figure (who is promoted two ranks in one assignment) and an every-man who achieves glory but hails from the largest military base in the South. The largest military training camp at the time, Camp Taylor stands in for an almost ubiquitous military experience—though it housed over 47,000 men at one time, it was demolished after WWI and converted into a residential neighborhood. Like the rest of Gatsby's personal story, Camp Taylor became another piece of barely-traceable history which, together with the rest of Gatsby's personal effects, helps create a more complete picture of who this enigma of a character was.

Despite the impact Gatsby's war story has on Nick, it is the other—less real—aspects of Gatsby's identity which capture Nick's attention. Like Henry's sister in *Blondes*, Gatsby seems to have been changed by the war, and yet his identity as a distinguished WWI veteran is barely given a moment's notice. Nick is struck by Gatsby's striving, his melancholy, and his desire to belong. His final meditation on Gatsby illustrates his impression of Gatsby as both a warning of and an inspiration for American Dreamers[161]. What strikes Nick most clearly, perhaps, is

[160] Despite, as we learn later, his true origins in North Dakota

[161] The passage begins with Nick's meditation on the "discovery" of the U.S.: "…I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams;

Gatsby's dedication to Daisy; but he moves quickly from Gatsby's particular problem to a more general assessment of *what Gatsby could mean for us*—presumably, the "Westerners" Nick mentions earlier, the "true Americans" Fitzgerald had hoped to depict:

> I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. (*Gatsby* 180)

Nick quite literally moves from the individual to the communal by brooding first on "Gatsby's wonder," his failure to recognize that his American Dream "was already behind him"; he argues that Gatsby's belief in the green light is continually "reced[ing] before us," and, interestingly, suggests that "we" (his circle? humanity? the reader?) must "beat on, boats against the current," even as that current inevitably bears us "back ceaselessly into the past" (180, emphasis added). It is here, in the last three lines of the novel, that I argue *Gatsby* clearly signals its commentary on the American Dream. Nick's musing seems to suggest that although Gatsby's striving for the Dream is admirable—and, for him, inspiring—he is not particularly optimistic about its achievability. Rather, he stresses that even while we must pursue it, we will be "borne back ceaselessly into the past" rather than ahead into a new future. It is this moment in the novel that I suggest fossilizes Gatsby as an inspirational—aspirational—hero. He will never achieve the Dream, and yet he stands as a martyr to the *idea* of its achievement. The story is not entirely hopeless, however, because while Gatsby fails to achieve the Dream, the sympathetic narrator, Nick, suggests that Gatsby's failure is no fault of his own, but rather is the fault of a corrupt,

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for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder…" (*Gatsby* 180)

inhumane social system. The suggestion is, of course, perhaps things will be different for *someone*, *someday*.

b. “Artifice”: Lorelei’s Dissatisfying Achievement

Like Gatsby, Lorelei reinvents herself (or, to be more precise, is willingly *reinvented by* others) on the threshold of adulthood. Lorelei tells us that her father sent her away to school (because he disapproved of her seeing gentlemen late at night), and so she had been “in the business colledge [sic] in Little Rock for about a week when a gentleman called Mr. Jennings paid a call on the business college because he wanted to have a new stenographer” (*Blondes* 25). Although at this point Lorelei has only been in college for a week, and thus has no typing or secretarial skills, Mr. Jennings selects her to be his new secretary and tells Lorelei’s teacher “that he would help [her] finish [her] course in his office because he was only a lawyer and [she] really did not have to know so much” (25). After a year of working in his office, Lorelei learns that Mr. Jennings “was not the kind of gentleman that a young girl is safe with” (meaning he associates with girls who are “not nice,” or who are sexually promiscuous), she has “quite a bad case of the histerics [sic]… and when [she] came out of it, it seems that [she] had a revolver in [her] hand and it seems that the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings” (25). Although Lorelei’s claim that “the revolver”—not she—“had shot Mr. Jennings” is significant, the most important aspect of this scene is the brief insight it gives us into Lorelei’s character and the rhetorical ingenuity of the novel as a whole[162]. Lorelei’s rhetorical move in dissociating herself from the crime and placing blame on the object rather than herself (as the person in control of the inanimate object) is central to her constructed persona. In essence, it confuses the action by making Lorelei appear

[162] See Jason Barrett-Fox, “Rhetorics of Indirection, Indiscretion, Insurrection: The ‘Feminine Style’ of Anita Loos, 1912-1925”

both witless (she doesn't even know how to fire a gun) and blameless (it was an accident, she didn't know what she was doing, and so on).

Lorelei's murder trial demonstrates her apparently innocent and guileless manipulation of men at its finest. Lorelei appears to use only her feminine charms and the aid of her lawyer, who disarms the jury with the classic appeal to their sensibilities: "they practically all had had either a mother or a sister" (*Blondes* 25). Leaning heavily into her identity as a "nice girl," Lorelei presents herself (with the aid of her lawyer) as the young victim of a vile, older, criminal man—all without naming what his "crime" is, and only vaguely hinting at the sexual nature of their relationship. This angle is a success, and Lorelei recalls that "the jury was only out three minutes and then they came back and acquitted me" (*Blondes* 25). She then turns her wily charms on the judge:

> and when I kissed the judge he had tears in his eyes and he took me right home to his sister. I mean it was when Mr. Jennings became shot that I got the idea to go into the cinema, so Judge Hibbard got me a ticket to Hollywood. So it was Judge Hibbard who really gave me my name because he did not like the name I had because he said a girl ought to have a name that ought to express her personality. So he said my name ought to be Lorelei which is the name of a girl who became famous for sitting on a rock in Germany[163]. (*Blondes* 25-6)

Though acquitted, our heroine's new name complicates our understanding of her character. According to the German legend, a beautiful maiden, distraught over her unfaithful lover, threw herself into the Rhine and became a siren who lured fishermen to their deaths[164]. Thus, just as Jimmy Gatz's incarnation began long before but was finally completed in his kiss with Daisy, Lorelei's evolution from Arkansan simpleton to sophisticated siren begins with her attempted murder and is incarnate in the end of the trial. Lorelei's *professionalism*, if we would like to call it that, is first called into question in this origin story. Hegemen explains that "[t]he implication

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[163] Loos reveals Lorelei's original name as "Maybel Minnow" in her "Biography of a Book" (1963).
[164] See a brief description of the legend in "Lorelei". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 Jun. 2020.

that Lorelei was hired to do something other than stenography simultaneously literalizes the emerging image of the ideal secretary as a man's office 'wife' and obscures Lorelei's identity as a worker" (Hegemen 533). Similarly, this implication also complicates our understanding of Lorelei's complicity. The name the judge gives Lorelei implies some willful employment of her power over men, or at least some awareness of it, and yet Lorelei presents herself as an innocent bystander to whom "fate just keeps on happening." Central to Lorelei's (comic) appeal is the mystery of her complicity in her schemes—does she understand that she is using men? Does she engage in sexual activities with these men (and does she know that this is what they are after, that her engagements with men imply sexual favors in return)? Lorelei's carefully crafted narrative omissions give the impression that she is blissfully unaware of the scandalous implications of her actions—and inaction—but her "dumb blonde" persona only emphasizes Loos's critique of the inherent misogyny and sexual violence implicit in Lorelei's circumstances. The standards by which Lorelei judges what qualities make a girl "refined," "nice," or "respectable" exemplify Butler's concept of gender as an "imitation for which there is no original," especially because these standards, which are firmly supported, are ever-changing.

Despite Lorelei's seeming stupidity, her financial and social successes are the result of her particular brand of genius and evidence the constructedness and performativity of "Lorelei". Early on (presumably before the start of the novel), Lorelei learns the art of manipulating gentlemen without having to compromise her status as a 'nice girl.' She has come to understand that many men have a deeply vested interest in 'educating' her, often expressing a desire to have her remain solely in the company of those who will have a positive impact on her 'brains.' The novel itself is essentially 'funded' by one such gentleman, Mr. Eisman, who gives Lorelei the diary in which she writes her adventures. This desire, however, is simply one of possession: each

gentleman, whomever he is, wants to keep Lorelei 'pure' and innocent, and to have the satisfaction of 'educating' her without the threat of another gentleman snatching her up for themselves. Lorelei, of course, knows and understands this fact. She interprets 'education' as something distinct from the gentlemen's view of the concept, however, and so aligns it with her own interests in diamonds, money, and fame. Regardless of whose arm (and wallet) Lorelei hangs on to, she ensures that she is free to do what she wants and free of blame by choosing to interpret gentlemen's desires as complimentary to her own. For example, she feels entitled to the company of men whom she finds 'educational': "But so long as Gerry does not mind me going out with other gentlemen when they have something to give you mentally, I am going to luncheon with Eddie Goldmark of the Goldmark Films who is always wanting me to sign a contract to go into the cinema" (17). Lorelei's provision, "when they have something to give you mentally," serves as her pretext for pursuing various gentlemen throughout the novel, and the "something" she refers to is almost always cash or jewels.

As the novel progresses, however, she comes to understand that sooner or later she will have to *marry* one of these men to ensure continued financial stability—meaning, for her, that she will have one pocketbook to pick for the rest of her life—and so as she begins to focus on this impending serious decision with greater focus, her actions appear less accidental and more deliberate. Mr. Henry Spoffard is key to Lorelei's final goal of financial and social security, and presents the greatest challenge yet. His net worth is more than a diamond tiara or fancy engagement ring (which, disappointingly, turns out to be only his class ring from Amherst college)—in fact, according to Lorelei, his family practically owns the entire state of Pennsylvania. Lorelei not only needs to use her charms, but must make sizeable alterations to her carefully constructed dumb blonde/ innocent young girl persona, who must now also appeal to a

Presbyterian man and his family. The first challenge is, of course, to attract his attention, because he "really does not even look at a girl unless she at least looks like a Prespyterian [sic]" (77). Understanding the limitations Mr. Spoffard's religious devotion places on Lorelei's tactics of charm and deception, Lorelei decides to re-construct her persona to fit more neatly into a conservative Presbyterian mold. Henry and Lorelei are vastly different from one another—Henry makes a living "senshuring" [sic] plays, photographs, and other mediums of entertainment, while Lorelei remains interested in books only so long as they are "quite amusing in spots…quite riskay [sic]," even then, only on the condition that the amusing spots are relatively frequent and close together. Lorelei loves attending, hosting, and thinking about raucous parties (provided they have plenty of champagne). Henry is quite the opposite—in fact, Lorelei mentions that she hopes Henry will not hear about and attend her debutant, as "all Henry has to do to spoil a party is to arrive at it" (104). Despite their differences, Lorelei is willing to maintain her performance and overlook all that annoys her about Henry and his family for one important reason: money. On her way to marry Henry, however, Lorelei meets the first man who causes her to stop and think that maybe "money was not everything, because after all, it is only brains that count," and this is not the man she is engaged to marry, but rather the impoverished screen writer, Mr. Montrose (115). Mr. Montrose turns out to be a perfect match for Lorelei in more ways than one—when she decides to break it off with Henry, believing Mr. Montrose is the love of her life, Mr. Montrose suggests Lorelei marry Henry and convince him to fund their filmmaking enterprise, as that way, they could both benefit from the Spoffard family's deep pockets (117). Lorelei's marriage to Henry Spoffard provides Lorelei with the capital to accomplish all this and more—the novel ends with Lorelei's dream coming to fruition. Henry's wealth funds a film

enterprise in which everyone Lorelei cares for can be happily employed—including herself, as she now stars in the films Mr. Montrose writes.

The novel ends on a film set, the most artificial and performative space of all, as well as the space most conducive to the most "American" aspect of the American Dream—the creation and construction of oneself. The film set facilitates the expression of the most authentic Lorelei—she has achieved economic and social stability, and has managed to have all of her interests and intentions align. This completed, she now has the freedom to pursue her own interests, which happen to be *acting* and working on screenplays. She claims that "the greatest thing in life is to always be making everybody else happy," but acknowledges her own desire for happiness: "And so, while everybody is so happy, I really think it is a good time to finish my diary…feeling that, after all, everything always turns out for the best" (123). The conclusion of the novel provides several layers of performativity—the final setting is a film set; Lorelei feels most comfortable and authentic while *acting*; she has neatly tied up the narrative of her life, and leaves all the characters feeling happy, living out one big *happy ending*. And thus, Lorelei achieves her American Dream in all its performativity and artificiality. In fact, she creates a space wherein Henry's façade of control and authority allow for Lorelei, Dorothy, and his sister to (quite literally) *act* within a space over which they actually have control—including economic and social security. The artificiality of this performative space also implicitly satirizes Lorelei's achievement of the American Dream. After all, she achieves what is quite literally an illusion: Henry married her believing she is someone else, and everyone around her believes that she is something she is not. While her identity is tenuous and carefully constructed, however, she still presents herself, at least to her reader, as content and secure in her achievement.

c. Achievable or Aspirational? What Two Middlebrow Novels Demonstrate about the American Dream

By contrast, Gatsby's famous ending is not so happy or so liberating. Unlike Lorelei, who manages to scrape by with her fabricated identity unscathed—and in fact, reinforced—all of Gatsby's secrets are revealed, and he is left floating face-down in his pool; no one, excepting his father and Nick, attends his funeral. Gatsby is also a master manipulator, but he seems to have made a few mistakes more costly than Lorelei's. The most egregious of these mistakes is, of course, his infatuation with Daisy. While Lorelei safeguards herself by marrying Henry even though she loves Mr. Montrose, for Gatsby, the love object is the last essential piece of his illusion. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, though "Gatsby" existed before he met Daisy, the illusion can never be complete without her—thus, when it becomes clear that they will never have a future together, there does not seem to be an alternate option. Gatsby, too, must cease to be true. Thus, it seems that despite the protagonists' initial performativity, Lorelei's ultimate commitment to the performance and Gatsby's ultimate forfeiture of it are what sets them irreconcilably apart. Lorelei remains, in the end, a master manipulator whose true feelings we will never know. Gatsby, by contrast, is reduced to the nothingness from whence he came, and is transformed instead into an idea, much like the illusion of the American Dream itself—a promise just barely unattainable. Roger Pearson[165] argues that Fitzgerald, through *Gatsby*, serves as a "portent for the eclipse of the American dream, and the passing away of an era" (Pearson 639). Though Pearson is primarily interested in the image of Fitzgerald as a prophet, my interest lies not so much in the religious imagery of *Gatsby*, but in this eclipse of the American Dream which the novel supposedly illustrates. The novel's great disappointment—Gatsby's failure to attain his

[165] See Pearson, "*Gatsby*: False Prophet of the American Dream." *The English Journal* 59.5 (May 1970)

dream because of his unwillingness to adapt it—illustrates the end of an era of the American Dream of the hedonistic variety in Fitzgerald's time. We see a similar hedonism in *Blondes*—in fact, *Blondes* and *Gatsby* seem to illustrate a version of the American Dream wherein one can rise to prominence in the East Coast out of relative anonymity in Middle America and pursue *all of one's desires*. The desires in both novels seem, chiefly, related to wealth. Even Daisy seems more an image of affluence, her voice "tinkling with money," than an object of love—or, even if she *is* an object of love for Gatsby, she remains primarily an *object*; something to be *acquired* and *possessed* (*Gatsby* 30).

Perhaps more interestingly, it becomes clear on closer analysis that the protagonists of *Blondes* and *Gatsby* are both criminals. While Lorelei does not seem like one—a feature of her ditzy blonde aesthetic and carefully curated epistolary narrative style—stripped of the novel's humorous devices, it becomes glaringly obvious that her $7000 diamond tiara heist is no petty theft, and her entire persona depends on her success as a con artist. Similarly, Gatsby, as we know, made his fortune in "pharmaceuticals," but more accurately in mob activity with characters like Wolfsheim, who apparently collect teeth for collateral[166]. Corrigan argues that, like other mob-boss gangster stories, "*The Great Gatsby* skews the American Dream of material success as the reward for honest hard work and enterprise" (140). The stereotype of the U.S. as consumerist and mob-driven (discussed in Chapter One) is one the Council on Books in Wartime's Overseas Editions actively tried to push back against. One might assume, then, that *Gatsby*, like *Blondes* would be shunned as an ASE in favor of other, more flattering texts—and yet, *Gatsby* and Fitzgerald's other consumerist piece, "Diamonds as Big as the Ritz" enjoyed wide circulation as ASEs. This is where Gatsby's failure and the eclipse of the American Dream

[166] FOOTNOTE THIS CONVO

come back into play. *Gatsby* seems to punish its protagonist for striving *in the wrong way*. Although one cannot say for sure that Gatsby would have been rewarded with easy acceptance into the wealthy fold had he accumulated his fortune through "honest" work (like Tom's?), it is obvious that the culture within the novel does not take kindly to imposters—and the means by which Gatsby accumulates his wealth demonstrates just how much he does not belong. Nick notices that Gatsby had been—like most middlebrow hero(in)es—"overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (150). It is this overwhelming awareness that continues to set Gatsby apart, and to make clear his otherness. Nick comes to realize that Gatsby's story is one entirely about otherness, about difference: "I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life… After Gatsby's death, the East was haunted for me like that" (179). Geographically, these distinctions do not make sense; as a metaphor for understanding class, the nuevo-riche and old money, the distinctions are clear. Gatsby attempted to fit into a crowd in which he did not truly belong because he did not *come from* there. He remains, in the end, the sum of his material things—which include such performative pieces as the library full of uncut books; purely decorative, with no attempt made to explore beyond the cover.

III. The Novels as Material 'Things': BEYOND THE PAGES OF *GATSBY* and *BLONDES*

a. *Gatsby*, The G.I.s, and The Lasting Legacy of the Green Light

The Great Gatsby performed admirably during its run as an Armed Services Edition, but its meager single edition[167] does not fully explain its sudden renown in the postwar period. Corrigan asks: "How did *The Great Gatsby*, all but dead itself after Fitzgerald's death, come roaring back to life so forcefully that within two decades it infiltrated the syllabi and textbooks of high schools and colleges across the land and was embraced as one of our Great American Novels?" (Corrigan 216). The answer to that question is in part, according to Corrigan, due to the work being done on the home front by Fitzgerald's still-living famous friends after his death in 1940, as well as the circulation of his writing overseas. I argue that *Gatsby*'s surging popularity after WWII is largely due to the expanding and inherently middlebrow reading public the ASEs created. This reading public was undoubtedly made up of more than just academics and intellectuals—these were primarily military men and women at every rank[168]. Corrigan notes that these men and women, though a "captive audience for *Gatsby*" are likely to have been much more attentive readers of the novel than she finds in high school classrooms while conducting her research[169] (236). As she argues, "given the lack of alternatives, most of the soldiers who picked up *Gatsby* [probably] read the entire novel, cover to flimsy ASE cover" (236). Regardless of how attentively these soldiers read the novel, the most striking accomplishment of the Council on Books in Wartime is the sheer number of *readers* it both catered to and produced. As J. Young Cole explains in his book on the ASEs, "[t]he Armed Service Editions introduced

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[167] Compared, for instance, with *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*'s two editions, or the three editions of each of the other three Great American Novels with which *Gatsby* is often discussed: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Moby-Dick*.

[168] Although it is tempting to let my case rest here, it is important to acknowledge scholarship which argues that genre played a significant role in the lasting legacy of the novels—particularly the novel's respective elements of *tragedy* and the lasting appeal of tragedies in the canon of American literature (see Hammill, Hamilton, and Hutner). However, while genre does play some role in the lasting literary legacies of these novels, I do not think it is fair to say that genre alone or primarily accounts for their disparate reception histories.

[169] Several chapters of Corrigan's book involve her personal investigation of high schoolers' impressions and interpretations of the novel.

thousands of American soldiers and sailors to the pleasures of reading. Between 1943 and 1947, nearly 123 million copies of 1,322 titles of these flat, wide, and very pocketable paperbacks were distributed to U.S. Armed Forces around the world. Best-sellers, classics, mysteries, history, westerns, and poetry were part of each shipment" (Cole 3). Corrigan breaks this down even further to estimate that *Gatsby*'s ASE garnered over one million readers of the novel:

> Recall that Fitzgerald, even in his most ambitious moments in 1925, fantasized about selling only around 70,000 copies of the novel. Let's do the math: 155,000 ASE copies of *Gatsby*—designed to be read about seven times—is over a million readings of the novel, as compared to Scribner's sales of, tops, about 23,000 copies of the novel in 1925. Even if those ASE estimated readings are inflated, one of the things some of those World War II servicemen carried with them back home was an awakened interest in F. Scott Fitzgerald. (Corrigan 234)

As Corrigan notes, inflating the possible readership of a given ASE novel does not change the novel's projected readership-exposure. Fitzgerald's short story, "Diamonds as Big as the Ritz" was markedly more popular as an ASE, but worked with the novel to restore Fitzgerald's reputation—and as discussed, Fitzgerald's salvaged reputation helped cement *Gatsby*'s place as a Great American Novel by, frankly, no longer obscuring his writing. The ASEs assured Fitzgerald a greater readership than he could have achieved on the home front by including a greater number of copies to be shared among a wider and more captive audience who could risk reading a novel by a disgraced author because they did not have to pay for it.

I argue in Chapter One that a book's home-front popularity during the war was essential in the Council on Books in Wartime committee's consideration for selection[170], yet, in the case of *Gatsby*, popularity might not be the most accurate term. I contend that, as other scholars argue, the beginnings of the Fitzgerald revival—and thus, the revival of *Gatsby*—appear lucky rather than inevitable. After Fitzgerald's death in 1940, his successful and influential friends and

[170] See Chapter 1; see also Jeremy Hench and John Jamieson

literary critics rallied behind him and boosted his reputation as they had not been able to do during his life. Over the next five years, his reputation began to recover, and interest in his writings revived. In 1944, Leo and Miriam Gurko[171], instructors of English at Hunter College*,* argue in *College English* that "[t]he work of F. Scott Fitzgerald reveals with extraordinary sharpness the essential differences between the major writer and the minor writer," and that what "ultimately differentiates Fitzgerald among the novelists of his time is his paradoxical clothing of a hard, ironical pessimism in a style that is soft and woven with gossamer tracery. Yet, for all the peculiar excellence of the style, the range of his ideas remains hemmed in by the singular negativism of his view of the world and the dogged, unvaried way in which this is repeated from story to story" (Gurko 374). Gurko argues that Fitzgerald is thus, because of his "singular negativism" which is repeated, "unvaried," across his literature, primarily a minor writer of the "Jazz Age." Yet, while Gurko does not fully embrace *Gatsby*, their analysis of it marks the beginnings of Fitzgerald's revival in the general reading public as well as the academe. In January of 1945, Fitzgerald's old friend Dorothy Parker endorses and helps select works for *The Viking Portable Library: F. Scott Fitzgerald*, in which *Gatsby* was included; nine months later, in October 1945, ASE Group Z shipped out with 155,000 copies of *The Great Gatsby*, to be shared among and read by over a million servicemembers over the final three years of ASE circulation.

While the road to Fitzgerald's popularity in the general reading public, in scholarship, and in classrooms alike may have been bumpy, *Gatsby*'s ascendance to GAN status appeared steady from then forward. After its inclusion in Group Z of the ASEs, *Gatsby* appears regularly in academic scholarship, as suggested reading for the scholar, student, and layperson. In 1946, an

[171] Gurko, "The Essence of F. Scott Fitzgerald," *College English* 5.7 (1944)

issue of *College English* recommends a new edition of *The Great Gatsby* "for the general reader" (428); between 1946 and 1952, academic journals[172] are filled with analyses of the "particular richness" of *Gatsby*'s use of imagery; in 1955, *College English*[173] notes the advent of "'The Modern American Novel,'" the title of "an adult television program being conducted" by two English faculty members at Carnegie Institute of Technology, and mention *The Great Gatsby* among texts taught in the English Department at Carnegie. Again in 1955, literary critic, author, and Harvard professor W.M. Frohock[174] offers an interesting interpretation of what he considers the "accident" of Fitzgerald's revival:

> [Fitzgerald] returned to popularity in the vastly different climate of the later forties, under the protecting auspices of Henry James. The James revival… left a noticeable mark on the serious reading public. The new age demanded a novel animated by ethical concerns, and preferably one in which the action was refracted toward the reader through a "central moral consciousness," especially if it was written in "scenes." Such was the model James provided, and to critics who liked to define fiction as "the ordering of events by the moral imagination," *The Great Gatsby*, in particular, recommended itself highly. It had Nick at the center; it used a "scenic technique"; it incited its reader to meditate upon Values. Thus a writer who for a while had been dismissed as a parasite writing about parasites in *College Humor* suddenly returned to the top rank of American novelists. (Frohock 226)

Frohock suggests that while "Fitzgerald did not lack the talent to achieve a unity of tone like Hemingway's," he was often "tempted to use more qualifiers than he needs" in his prose—and while overqualification is "a generally shared habit" of authors of the period, what sets Fitzgerald apart from other egregious offenders (like Faulkner, according to Frohock), his "sometimes add nothing but the length of his sentence and… do not carry their own weight" (222). While much criticism about *Gatsby* had been focused on the particular faults of his writing style (and greatly influenced by Fitzgerald's own larger-than-life personality and public

[172] Notably, *College English*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, *The Journal of General Education*, and
[173] College English 16.8 (1955), p. 517
[174] Frohock, W.M. "Morals, Manners, and Scott Fitzgerald," *Southwest Review* 40.3. (1955). P. 220-228

alcoholism), in the postwar era, the "faults" of his writing style, such as his use of overqualification, are reframed; Frohock goes on to argue that what Fitzgerald succeeds at doing is capturing a particular "American" feeling. Unlike the "famous alienation of the Europeans," he claims, "We [Americans] produce at home the causes of our indigenous loneliness. There is nothing metaphysical in the sources of the feeling: Jay Gatsby is not lonely because he feels that the human condition requires men to live under an empty heaven and out of communication with those around him. He is lonely because he has moved out of the Middle West" (225). In the end, Frohock claims that Fitzgerald's stylistic faults "can be taken to correspond with an admirable ability to catch the feeling of things, on the one hand, and on the other a romantic inability, like Nick's, to interpret them" (228). He concludes his article with an affectionate—perhaps pitying, even—assessment of Fitzgerald's style as "the man himself, in his weakness and his strength" (228).

In 1961, the academic journal *Modern Fiction Studies* dedicated a special issue to "F. Scott Fitzgerald- *The Great Gatsby* Reconsidered." As in much of the New Criticism of the time, most of the articles in this special edition focused on repetition and imagery in *Gatsby* and other Fitzgerald works. Literary critic A.E. Dyson[175] wrote that *Gatsby* "has not only outlived its period and author," but that "it is one of the books that will endure" (Dyson 37). In his article, Dyson advocates for *Gatsby*'s place in world literature, despite its being "so obviously American" and a novel "which has been cited so often in definitions of the peculiarly American experience of the twentieth century" (37). Dyson goes so far as to claim that Gatsby's (failed) dreams "belong… to the story of humanity itself; as also does the irony, and judgement, of his awakening" (38). Beginning in the midcentury, the academy's embrace of *Gatsby* has been

[175] A. E. Dyson, "The Great Gatsby': Thirty-Six Years After," *Modern Fiction Studies* 7.1 (1961)

splashed across scholarship, in books, articles, magazine reviews; disparaging comments about the novel are difficult to come by, and even those are usually brushed aside by *Gatsby* scholars as having misunderstood Fitzgerald's style, genius, or intention. The F. Scott Fitzgerald Society was formed in 1992 to "celebrate and promote" Fitzgerald's work, and in 2002, the inaugural issue of the *F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* joined ranks with other academic and literary journals.

Scholarship since the turn of the 21st century has focused on *The Great Gatsby* as both Great American Novel and exemplar Modernist text—terms which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, in his analysis of representations of time in Woolf and Fitzgerald, Alexander S. Fobes[176] takes for granted that *Gatsby* is classified as a modernist novel. Rather than defend this categorization, Fobes argues that Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* "are indeed both representative and influential modernist novels, perhaps all the more so because their characters seek to preserve or reestablish the order and stability of the pre-World War era" (Fobes). Several other scholars similarly assume *Gatsby*'s accepted status as a modernist text, yet in analysis, much of the scholarship routinely acknowledges what I consider middlebrow elements in their coverage of Fitzgerald's portrayal of the American Dream. In a 2008 issue of *College English*, for example, Theresa Kulbaga observes in her analysis of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* an international recognition of *Gatsby* as "the quintessential American novel… of the American dream" (Nafisi 109, qtd. Kulbaga 517). She notes that in "Dismissing the inextricably and inarticulation of literary, consumer, and nationalist realms, the narrator insists that this dream 'is not about money but what [Gatsby] imagines he can become. It is not a comment on America as a materialistic country but an *idealistic* one.'" (Kulbaga 514). Nafisi, and Kulbaga in her analysis of Nafisi's

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[176] See Alexander S. Fobes, "F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, and the Watch for Spots of Time," *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review,* Vol 11.1 (2013).

estimation of *Gatsby*, agree with assessments that the novel transcends consumer culture and materialism to achieve something sublime. Nafisi argues further that, in contrast to Eastern countries which supposedly "obsess over the past," "'They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgia about the promise of the future"[177] (Kulbaga 514). Nafisi's assertion and Kulbaga's complicity with it suggest that the thematic primacy of the American Dream subsumes even the stylistic aspects of the novel. And yet, in disembodying Gatsby's failed Dream from the other elements of the text—namely, its materialism and consumerism—both Nafisi and Kulbaga participate in an analysis of Gatsby which ignores its middlebrow elements, as well as the middlebrow essence of the American Dream which it promotes.

While some scholars might argue that the category "Middlebrow Moderns[178]" exists for precisely the problems of categorization which I identify in *Gatsby*, I argue that *Gatsby* embodies the middlebrow novel in every way, and its significance should be understood first and foremost in terms of middlebrow culture. One might argue that Fitzgerald's psychologizing complicates the "ease" of his writing, and renders him closer to the difficulty of high modernism than the lack of "undue effort" of the middlebrow. While this may be true in select cases, I argue that *The Great Gatsby* in particular is loved for many of the same reasons the middlebrow has been overlooked and even despised. I argue that the novel's concern with domestic space, courtship, failed communication, and changing (print media) technology engage with and embody the anxieties of middlebrow culture, and especially the anxieties which high modernism employs to distinguish itself from the middlebrow. Its inclusion in the Council on Books in Wartimes Armed Services Editions (a middlebrow institution) as well as its continued presence

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[177] 2008. Theresa A. Kulbaga, "Pleasurable Pedagogies: 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' and the Rhetoric of Empathy" *College English* 70.5. Passages quoted by Kulbaga can be found on pages 109, 142, and 109 (respectively) of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. d

[178] See, for example, the volume

on syllabi and standardized tests has ensured it a wide and democratized reading audience; its status as frequently-assigned requires that it is a relatively accessible text, and not require "undue intellectual effort"; both its engagement with consumer culture and its tragic critique of the American Dream connects it intimately with anxieties about opportunity in the United States; and, finally, the central questions about identity—obviously Gatsby's, but even Nick's, Daisy's, and Jordan's—reveal aspiration, imitation, and construction as fundamental elements of an "American" identity. *Gatsby* complicates the characterization of the middlebrow as innately feminine, and makes clear the connections between middlebrow consumer culture and the middlebrow nature of the American Dream as discussed in this dissertation. I argue that these appeals have significantly contributed to the novel's lasting legacy.

CONCLUSION

Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* demonstrate the middlebrow American quality of *things*, both through the content of the novels and through the novels' histories as print objects, or *things* themselves. Gatsby and Lorelei's desire to accumulate and display the material symbols of wealth evidence an acute attention to the growing concern with capitalism and consumerism shared by Modernist contemporaries like Woolf and later, armchair experts in the 1940s and 1950s who feared that the "'happy-go-spending' feminine consumerist ethos" of middlebrow literature was effeminizing the traditional rugged masculinity of American men[179]. The literary legacies of the novels also contribute to the complicated construction of the American Dream in the postwar era more than two decades after their publication. What is interesting, then, about pairing these two novels is the opportunity they present to consider the

[179] For more on this concept, see Poole's article on the Armed Services Editions and masculine anxiety, "As Popular as Pin-Up Girls." The concept of the "feminine consumerist ethos" of middlebrow literature is discussed in greater detail in the first two chapters

ways in which their divergent literary legacies demonstrate the complicated truth about American Dream attainment.

The Armed Service Edition of *The Great Gatsby* ensured that it was read by over a million U.S. readers overseas—some of whom inevitably wrote or talked about Fitzgerald's work when they returned after the war. That "*Gatsby* is the one American novel that most educated Americans have read" even today means that this 1925 dud is open to re-exploration and revaluation by a vast number of what Corrigan calls "regular" readers—that is, readers without PhDs or even a particular love of literature (Corrigan 5). Though considered a Great American Novel and an intellectual masterpiece with an academic literary review dedicated to its author, I argue that *Gatsby* is loved for the same reasons middlebrow literature in general has been reviled—as un-intellectual, stylistically unsophisticated, and thematically unvaried in portrayals of domestic concerns. One academic detractor publicly complained that *Gatsby* is "aesthetically overrated, psychologically vacant, and morally complacent; I think we kid ourselves about the lessons it contains. None of this would matter much to me if *Gatsby* were not also sacrosanct" (Shultz, qtd Corrigan 244). In essence, *Gatsby* seems to fit well into the critiques of middlebrow literature given by Woolf; it presents quintessential themes and identifiably American tropes, and provides intellectual stimulation without undue effort. Though sometimes applauded for its complexity and modernist techniques[180], *Gatsby* at its best is an accessible novel, and was made great by this very accessibility. Although, as Corrigan argues, Fitzgerald's reputation was restored by his influential friends, it was the Council on Books in Wartime which actually got the reading public *reading* Fitzgerald again, and with gusto. The vast reading public created and maintained by the Council on Books in Wartime helped ensure both

[180] See Alexander S. Fobes

that *Gatsby* would be read by many, and that its numerous "Great American" themes would resonate with millions, not just during the war, but for generations to come.

While the Lorelei Lee of Loos's novel is demure and ditsy, Marilyn Monroe's embodiment of the character is sexually aggressive and pointedly manipulative. Monroe's Lorelei represents the post-WWII, Cold War fears about waning American masculinity discussed in Chapter Two. The bookish and artsy men whom Monroe's Lorelei manipulates represent contemporary society's greatest fears—effeminate, incompetent, and oblivious men, susceptible to the wiles of a smarter (probably communist?) conniving woman. Loos herself described Monroe's performance of Lorelei as "sublime" —Monroe's copy of the novel bore a personalized inscription from Loos: "To Marilyn Monroe, a true artist and the greatest Lorelei of all time—with my gratitude and devotion[181]." Its heroine is evoked even today as a symbol of lavish consumerism through the most enduring image the *Blondes* franchise has left behind—the image of Marilyn Monroe's Lorelei dressed in a tight pink mermaid gown with pink gloves and a thick diamond collar necklace[182]:

Figure 3.1: Marilyn Monroe as Lorelei Lee (1953), IMDB

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[181] Monroe's personal library; inscription dated April 4th, 1953.

[182] The most recent example of this use of *Blondes* iconography can be found in the DC Movie *Birds of Prey* (Cathy Yan 2020), which follows the character Harley Quinn as she attempts to find an identity outside of her relationship with the Joker and general subordination to and abuse by men.

While the name "Lorelei Lee" and plot of *Blondes* have been all but forgotten, Monroe's performance of "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend[183]" (costume included) have been recycled to promote the changing symbols of wealth as the decades have passed. Monroe's Lorelei came to eclipse her 1925 original to endure as a lasting and subtle critique of consumerism, women's independence, and sexuality in the capitalist landscape of the U.S. I argue that while *Gatsby* has ascended the bookshelves of many an American home and classroom, *Blondes* has remained consistently, though subtly, in the realm of consumerist iconography in more popular literary forms—where it has always flourished, and where it had always been intended to hold sway.

Figure 3.2: Madonna in "Material Girl" (1985). IMDB.

[183] While the most famous performance of this song is featured in the 1953 film adaptation, the song was written for the Broadway production of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1949).

Figure 3.3: Kylie Jenner for *V Magazine,* Halloween (2019). E! News

Figure 3.4: Margot Robbie in *Birds of Prey* (2020). IMDB.

As a pair, the novels (as *things*) demonstrate the intimate relationship between the middlebrow, gender norms and values established by military masculinity, and the American Dream as it comes to be constructed in the postwar period. The literary histories of the novels as material *things themselves* demonstrates one of the more problematic outcomes of an explicitly feminized understanding of the middlebrow. While *Blondes* owed its contemporary commercial success to its engagement with consumerism both in the narrative itself and through serial publication in a popular women's fashion magazine, *Gatsby* is greatly indebted to the Council on Books in Wartime, which ensured its consumption by a large, captive audience. As stories about the American obsession with *things*, the protagonists' disparate outcomes problematize the

concept of the American Dream as one which is actually—or even should be—attainable. The concept of the bootstrap work ethic—that one can become upwardly mobile and successful through hard work *alone*—implicitly signals a sort of moral compass within the framework of the Protestant Ethic of the Founding Fathers, and yet, no such moral compass is demanded by the American Dream in practice. Thus, Lorelei's dissatisfying success and Gatsby's sympathetic failure demonstrate a fundamental tension between the Protestant Ethic on which the U.S. was founded, and the material imperatives of the American Dream.

CONCLUSION

> The ethos of academic reading diverges significantly from lay reading… That one person immerses herself in the joys of *Jane Eyre*, while another views it as symptomatic expression of Victorian imperialism, often has less to do with the political beliefs of those involved than their position in different scenes of readings.
> Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature*

> '[B]ad' readers were not born; they were made. And their creation helped devise enduring strategies for how people could use literature to learn to speak, feel, perceive, and interact with others throughout the post-war period.
> -Merve Emre, *Paraliterary*

In this dissertation, I analyze the political and ethical implications of print culture, popular reading, and middlebrow literature within the context of WWII and the postwar era, with particular attention to the promises of the American Dream. I argue that because literature impacts readers' lived experiences and their communities, it's essential to understand the ethics of reading and literary study to understand the impact of the American Dream on the politics of well-being in the 20th century. As a military brat who moved every three to four years growing up, I have always been interested in the concepts of required or standardized literature, a consistent and coherent American identity, and especially in the American Dream, to which the military purports itself to be the most direct route. This dissertation argues that the lasting legacies of the material objects of a particular American Dream demonstrate the interdependencies of literature, policy, and U.S. culture, and makes clear the political and ethical impact of engagement with a variety of literary forms. As the title suggests, the American Dream is in part constructed *by* and has immense consequences *for* the well-being of those living in the U.S., including citizen-readers. The American Dream I discuss in this dissertation is, to use the language of Lauren Berlant, *cruelly optimistic*. Cruel optimism, according to Berlant, characterizes attachments as "clusters of promises" toward a desired object-idea, even when that object-idea inhibits the conditions of fulfilling those very promises and negatively impacts one's *well-being*. Maintaining attachments to the promises of American Dream mythology, no matter

how damaging to one's sense of well-being, simultaneously makes day-to-day life more bearable, even as the imperatives of that Dream make life more difficult.

In the context of the American Dream, the objects themselves—the house, the suburb, the family, pursuing higher education, owning a lot of books—are not necessarily *problems* in themselves; the cultivated attachment to the *promises* of the Dream, however, *is*. The particular image of the Dream which I argue is constructed through simultaneous (though not necessarily coordinated) activities in government, the military, academia, and civil sectors like suburban planning, is built with one ideal beneficiary in mind: the heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, educated white male. The Dream is posited, *especially* by benefits articulated in the post-WWII GI bill, as being open and available to a much larger demographic. In fact, depending on the institution from which one gathers information about the Dream, it will seem more or less attainable to those outside of this strict mythical norm. While the Dream itself—feelings of security, peace, comfort, prosperity, and belonging at its core—is not gendered or racialized, it *is* inherently a class-based Dream, and the institutions which govern individuals' attachments to it and communities' abilities to achieve it *are* racialized and gendered because of its rootedness in the racism and sexism of the post-war period.

The questions at the heart of this dissertation examine and combine several unlikely cultural apparatuses: How do military recreation projects and veterans' benefits lead us to a deeper understanding of the American Dream as conceptualized by the entire nation—military *and* civilian? Why does this particular conception of the American Dream endure, and why does it matter? How are the military and the middlebrow connected, and how does this connection deepen our understanding of the American Dream and its consequences? Using these questions as a point of entry, I seek to examine how the quotidian realities, benefits, and hardships of the

war in turn impacted the American *reader*, higher education, middlebrow culture, and home life, and how that influence produced an enduring mythology of the American Dream and its material objects. As I will demonstrate, analyzing selected Armed Services Editions (which I'll refer to as ASEs) and the ways in which stories circulated *during* and immediately *after* the war clarify the ways in which they in fact become intimately woven into American cultural mythologies *about* war, national identity, and the American Dream.

I argue that after WWII, the American Dream comes to be understood in more overtly middlebrow terms—it comes to involve marriage, the suburbs, and economic security. The GI Bill's education and housing benefits significantly impacted the establishment of the American Dream as we understand it today—that is, as a "dream" with a particular imagery attached to it. The GI Bill and the ASEs work together to cohere this Dream; that is because what the ASEs as a body of texts imagine as possible, the GI Bill makes legally achievable for a select group. This particular version of the American Dream congeals in the 1950s, after the instability of the war thrusts the U.S. into a state of conservative anxiety over self-preservation, a period which continues to reveal the middlebrow core of the Dream itself. The WWII recreation projects and postwar veterans' assistance programs helped to cement the still-enduring vision of the American Dream as the suburban materialist utopia inhabited by college-educated parents, their children, and perhaps a pet, manifested through the pull-oneself-up-by-the-bootstraps work ethic and characterized by stability, security, and belonging.

Since 1977, 25 distinct pieces of legislation have been introduced in Congress bearing the phrase "American Dream" in their titles or abstracts. Each piece of legislation purporting to "restore" the American Dream connects citizenship and rightful belonging to economic growth, homeownership, or higher education, and seems to gesture back towards an idealized memory of

the prosperity of the postwar period. Yet, even in the 1950s, critics griped about the difficulty of achieving the Dream, or the potential of young people to squander its legacy. In a 1949 article in the *Washington Post*, Malvina Lindsay laments the "dull" inheritors of the American Dream, whom she claims lack the aggression of their forefathers and seek "security" instead[184]. Contemporary critics' insistence on the rugged, aggressive American ideal and lack of faith in the younger generation's "fitness" to take on the Dream reinforces its rootedness in an always imagined past.

This dream constructed for the few, but positioned as achievable to all, highlights the underlying tension between the "bootstrap" work ethic of the Dream and its materialistic impulse. The threat and mystery of the American Dream is essential to understand because, despite its seeming closeness, it is *unachievable* precisely because it is a nostalgic myth founded on an imagined past. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, this imagined past is constructed as *always already* existing in the postwar era. The concepts of American identity and the American Dream to which I refer in this dissertation are in many ways dependent on the paradigm of **military masculinity** and the elusive concept of **middlebrow**; and thus it is important to demonstrate the relevance of viewing "America" and the American Dream as inherently middlebrow concepts in order to fully understand the importance of the ASEs, the impact of the GI bill, and why the two should be studied together as producers of the enduring mythology of the American Dream.

I argue that the **middlebrow** is simultaneously an ***ethic*****,** an ***aesthetic,*** and an ***etiquette*** whose status is retroactively conferred upon it. This explains why, for example, certain print editions of Shakespeare's plays or entire institutions (like the ASEs and the Book-of-the-Month

[184] This quote can be found on page 32 of the Introduction.

Club, which published a variety of genres) can be considered middlebrow. At its most elementary, the middlebrow ethic is built on *imitation* and/or *aspiration*, especially to economic security, prestige, and social acceptance. In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, it is Francie's continual striving to use literacy and artifice to climb out of her impoverished immigrant neighborhood; in *Gatsby* and *Blondes*, it is accumulating the material objects and correct etiquette which will enable them to "fit in" with higher social circles. The middlebrow aesthetic is the display of the objects of desire which *embody* the ethic. For example, in Chapter 2 of my dissertation, the suburban home signifies economic security, prestige, and social acceptance via its inherently exclusive nature—while still far more accessible than mansions in upper class neighborhoods. Finally, middlebrow *etiquette* is learned (usually through manners guides or middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club); it is an imitation of the taste, class, and charm one desires.

I argue that the particular middlebrow quality of a *thing*, or of literature, depends on its configuration as what John Searle (and Thorstein Veblen before him) terms an "institutional fact." The middlebrow quality of a *thing* in many ways presupposes the existence of "highbrow" institutions, literatures, and values from which it must be distinguished. The institutions where literature or objects are consumed can *make them* middlebrow by nature of the *method of consumption*. The object or idea is considered middlebrow when the person consuming it or the institution *disseminating* it is perceived as imitative, insincere, or aspirational. That is, the content of a text is not as important for its identification as middlebrow as is the manner in which it is disseminated and consumed. In short, I argue that the middlebrow is fundamentally democratic in the sense that it makes an object or idea widely accessible to a middle-class consumer. The American Dream is a dream of adaptation and adaptability, and the middlebrow

aesthetic argues that the "evolution of self" involved in its achievement can be *bought*. Thus, the middlebrow and the American Dream, as I have defined them here, are inextricably linked.

As I have mentioned, an analysis of the American Dream must necessarily embrace an interdisciplinary approach. I situate my research at the intersections of affect theory, reception history, literary criticism, memory politics, and war and military studies. Because my arguments about the American Dream rely so heavily on the middlebrow, my dissertation engages with the print and literary histories of middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club and the ASEs before moving on to my primary texts; similarly, in order to demonstrate the degree to which the mythology of the American Dream permeates every facet of lived experience in the postwar U.S., I engage with policy, statistics, and history throughout, but especially in my second chapter.

I consider Merve Emre's paraliterary critique and Rita Felski's consideration of the reader-citizen the point of departure for my examination of the middlebrow readers, institutions, and environments I focus on in this dissertation. Emre's *Paraliterary* (2017) suggests that at the turn of the century, various ideologies of reading brought a range of readers to serious literary fiction, juxtaposing "bad" modes of reading (categorized as *imitative*, *emotional*, *faddish*, and *information-seeking*) with "proper" reading, which uses academically sanctioned approaches such as close reading. These "bad" readings are in fact recognizable modes of "middlebrow" reading, and were clearly defined by and in contrast to a High Cultural ethos, which valued an appreciation of *literature as an aesthetic form* over *consumption*.

Emre's categories of "bad" reading and Rita Felski's impetuses of reading reinforce the idea that engagement in extra-academic reading has been considered *paraliterary* or middlebrow for decades. Tellingly, Emre's "reading to feel" and Felski's "enchantment" are closely related if

not the same motive. Similarly, the paraliterary practice of "reading for information," as Emre puts it, is one which Felski identifies as an essential truth of the literary text: academic modes of reading do not erase our fundamental understanding that texts reveal a deeper truth about ourselves as people and about the world around us. Thus, the attempt to distinguish middlebrow literature from more "meaningful" or high cultural literatures evidences a discomfort with sentimentality and, ultimately, its threats to hyper-masculinized cultural models of reading and being in postwar "America."

This project is also indebted to theoretical frameworks of Lauren Berlant and Viet Thanh Nguyen regarding attachment, nostalgia, and memory. As I mentioned before, the framework through which I critique the objects and promises of the American Dream engages Berlant's theorization of *cruel optimism*, the very attachment style which makes the promises of the American Dream so dangerous. In his book, *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen argues that understanding that war is in fact fought by the nation and not by the soldier alone, rather than thinking of soldiers as the face and body of war (225), highlights the devastating (yet realized) potential of war stories. Nguyen claims that war stories are important because war stories distill the image or identity of a given war, authorized by the nation. Because war is profitable, not just as an act but as a national memory, war will continue so long as we consume it as entertainment without accepting the banal with the glory. This project thus seeks to resist both the glory and the "guts" of WWII narratives by focusing instead on the seemingly quotidian areas of wartime recreation and postwar education and home life, and the nation's enduring attachments to the story of WWII.

Chapter one seeks to answer the question: What do two particular gendered, middlebrow book projects demonstrate about the construction of the concept of the American Dream during

WWII? I argue in this chapter that the stated aims of the Council on Books in Wartime (which I analyze in detail), as well as several key similarities between the ASEs and the contemporaneous Book-of-the-Month Club demonstrate the middlebrow nature of the ASEs. While the project was largely praised, some critics noted with despair the similarities between the ASEs and other middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club. These similarities ranged from specific texts, to shared council members, to methods of selection and dissemination, and this tension furthered anxieties about the feminizing qualities of the middlebrow. Examining the BoMC alongside the ASE project provides a more complete picture of the middlebrow character of the American Dream as it intersects with military masculinity.

As evident in servicemembers' letters to Betty Smith about her novel*, middlebrow literature* creates and perpetuates the idea of the American Dream. These servicemembers' letters also demonstrate that the aspects of the Dream they most treasured were the middlebrow ethic of *striving* and *aspiration* (which for Francie is executed through literacy), and the security and belonging symbolized by the Tree of Heaven. By comparing the BoMC and ASE book distribution projects, as well as reading Smith's novel alongside these letters to Smith, we can see how foundationally the American Dream is rooted in the middlebrow, and how the "American" value of military masculinity both threatens and is dependent on this idea of the middlebrow.

Chapter two explores the ways in which higher education and suburban home ownership come to be part and parcel of the middlebrow vision of the American Dream. In this chapter, I discuss two GI bill entitlements in particular—Education and Housing—to demonstrate how these entitlements present the possibility of achieving a particular kind of middle-class lifestyle in the U.S., but one that is in truth only easily attainable by a select group. The bill did not

protect nonwhite and women veterans from the denial of benefits they would face in racist and sexist institutions. This is not to say that *no* women or nonwhite veterans were able to take advantage of these entitlements, but these barriers to access were not accidental. It is essential to understand the social and civil restrictions imposed on veterans in order to understand the bill's implementation and the lasting image of American life and the American Dream which that disparity consequently produced. Finally, this chapter discusses the implications of the suburban boom on racialized and gendered cultural values in the U.S., which manifest in the *aesthetic* image of the suburban home. In this chapter, I read *bookaflage*—the use of books as objects to display one's cultural, racial, sexual, gendered, and classed identities—as further evidence that, as Susan Hegemen and Bill Brown have noted, American identity is in large part constituted by our accumulation and *display* of things. Like each middlebrow institution discussed throughout the dissertation, debates about suburbia imply once more that the democratizing effect of middlebrow culture is both alluring and challenging to the wider U.S. culture.

Chapter three examines the history of middlebrow culture and literature as it emerges in the U.S. in the 1920s with the ultimate goal of illustrating the lasting legacy of middlebrow aspiration on the concept of the American Dream. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *The Great Gatsby*, I examine the ways in which the materialism and consumerism both encouraged and critiqued by these novels grounds the American Dream steadily in the unattainable. Brown's discussion of the power and meaning of "things" of literature serves as a framework to analyze the double "thingness" of American identity and the Americanness of "things" by centering the protagonists' engagement with the material in the construction of their identities. As a pair, the novels (as *things*) demonstrate the intimate relationship between the middlebrow, gender norms and values established by military masculinity, and the American Dream as it comes to be

constructed in the postwar period. The literary histories of the novels as material *things themselves* demonstrate one of the more problematic outcomes of an explicitly feminized understanding of the middlebrow. As stories about the American obsession with *things*, the protagonists' disparate outcomes problematize the concept of the American Dream as one which is actually attainable. The concept of the bootstrap work ethic—that one can become upwardly mobile and successful through hard work *alone*—implicitly signals a sort of moral compass within the framework of the Protestant Ethic of the Founding Fathers, and yet, no such moral compass is demanded by the American Dream in practice. Thus, Lorelei's dissatisfying success and Gatsby's sympathetic failure demonstrate a fundamental tension between the Protestant Ethic on which the U.S. was founded, and the material imperatives of the American Dream.

Looking Ahead

In this dissertation, I have focused on the effect of literature on the individual and on the production of a national cultural mythology. I have sought to interrogate the national cultural mythology of the American Dream as well as the institutions I consider to have been its foundation, and have argued that the American Dream is an inherently middle-class one. The American Dream as conceived of myth, aesthetic, material objects, and economic conditions is clearly rooted in the middlebrow ethic—an ethic which by necessity was constructed by and in contrast to a High Cultural Ethic touted by the Modernist critic. I argue that the image of the American Dream produced through WWII-era military programs, veterans' entitlements, and "middlebrow" literary institutions continues to be shaped as an object of desire for many Americans through the hundreds of pieces of "American Dream Act" legislation since the 1970s, which impact access to healthcare, higher education, and homeownership, and thus its relevance

continues to be apparent even 75 years after its initial promotion in literature, advertisement, and cultural capital.

My fundamental argument is that the American Dream is innately middlebrow and yet also indebted to the incompatible paradigm of military masculinity. This argument interrogates our attachment to the cruel promises of the American Dream and reveals fundamental and uncomfortable truths about the relationships between literature, culture, and national identity. I argue that scholarship which focuses on the middlebrow as a uniquely feminized category or one which requires *less intellectual effort*—even when treated generously or optimistically—still perpetuates boundaries between high, middle, and low culture which necessarily considers some literature "meaningful," and others, not. Directing more acute attention to the middlebrow reveals the extent to which it is in fact one of the ways in which the nation constructs its identity. My choice to approach the middlebrow, military masculinity, and the American Dream from a reparative reading with attention to memory politics means that while I do not offer explicit critiques of American political power, I encourage further interrogation of the interdisciplinary ground where I locate my research.

The American Dream as conceived of myth, aesthetic, material objects, and economic conditions is clearly rooted in the middlebrow ethic—an ethic which by necessity was constructed by and in contrast to a High Cultural Ethic touted by the Modernist critic. As Emre notes in the epigraph above, "bad" readers were constructed by cultural institutions which categorized modes of reading as "good" and "bad". Categorizing reader-citizens as such perpetuates an illusory intellectual class system in the U.S., a concept which blatantly ignores the fact that reader-citizens have always read a variety of materials for different purposes; that is, "even good readers had to be bad sometimes" (Emre 11). In fact, I argue that value-judgements necessarily imbricated in

horizons of literary understanding—the "middlebrow" judgement I focus on—allow us to see and understand the practical work of ethics in our cultural institutions.

Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the American Dream should be understood as a *middlebrow* dream, and yet, it is also foundationally connected to the incompatible paradigm of military masculinity. Military masculinity is the implicit association of the *military as an institution* with inherent masculine qualities such as physical strength, mental toughness, and fortitude. Like the middlebrow, however, the military masculine is defined primarily by what it is *not*, and thus it is positioned as incompatible with "feminine" institutions, or middlebrow institutions which are coded feminine. The primary middlebrow print culture institution I examine in conversation with military masculinity as a producer of the American Dream is the Armed Services Editions (which I refer to as ASEs). The ASEs was a book project produced by the (CBW), Council on Books in Wartime, a non-profit assembled just after the attack on Pearl Harbor to bolster national morale through reading. The CBW's slogan "Books are Weapons in the War of Ideas!" might suggest that the ASEs were topically related to the war effort, but as I demonstrate in Chapter 1, this was not the case. The CBW produced approximately 3.2 million copies of 1,322 titles for deployment of the ASE project between 1943 and 1947.

I began this project with a very particular idea of the purpose and agenda of the Council on Books in Wartime. Three weeks before my dissertation defense, I had the privilege of visiting the Council on Books in Wartime archive at Princeton University for the first time since its closure—just after my qualifying exams—in March 2020. While I was unable to include my findings because the dissertation had already been submitted, the wealth of material I found in the archive left me wondering at the boundaries of this dissertation project as well as its potential for future work. For the purposes of the dissertation, I limited my analysis to WWII and the immediate

postwar period, but it is with noting that although I argue the middlebrow American Dream is *constructed* in this era, it becomes increasingly apparent as the 20th century progresses. As texts like Beth Driscoll's *The New Literary Middlebrow* (2014) suggest, the middlebrow continues to extend into—and some might say, *permeate*—U.S. culture in the 21st century. The editors of *Slate* magazine argued in 2011 that the U.S. was experiencing the "golden age of middlebrow art," evidenced by television shows like *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire* (to name a few), which package complex issues in mass-appeal entertainment. Combined with social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, where bite-size entertainment is shared and made legible by users' cultural capital, who is to say we *aren't* in a golden age of the middlebrow in the U.S. even today? As media—and the ways in which it influences our ideas of and thoughts about the attainability of the American Dream—continues to evolve and legislation continues to reify what some might consider an impossible American Dream, how might our conversations about the middlebrow, the American Dream, and the institutions that connect them grow along with it?

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[*] End Note:
Aims; Council on Books in Wartime Records, MC038, Public Policy Papers, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

The Aims of the Council are:
Aims:

1. To promote the widest possible use of books valuable to the Allied war effort
2. To further the use of books in the building and maintenance of morale

3. To urge the widest possible reading of those books which help to clarify our aims, to support the democratic idea and expose the true nature of the enemy.
4. To place the technical information available in books on the training, the fighting, and the production fronts.
5. To cooperate with the Government in the conservation of vital materials.
6. To help win the war. (p 2)

"…By the use of books to sustain morale through relaxation and inspiration."
"By the use of books in the building and maintenance of the will to win."
"By the use of books to expose the true nature of the enemy"
"By the use of books to clarify our war aims and the problems of the peace"
How these Aims Can Be Achieved

I. By acting as a clearing house for ideas relating to the use of such books.
II. By becoming the agency through which the book trade can cooperate with all organizations whose aims in their respective fields are similar to those in the Council.
III. By acting as a focal point for cooperation between the industry and the various government information and censorship agencies.
IV. By offering advice based on experience to publishers who have books which merit wider distribution through nationally organized groups.
V. By the establishment of machinery to handle all phases of public relations, for example:
   a. The preparation and distribution of reading lists.
   b. The Discussion of the place of books in a war society by prominent men and women on programs at Times Hall in New York City and elsewhere, and the distribution, in pamphlet form, of the material thus secured.
   c. The inauguration of radio programs similar to the one by Stemphen Vincent Benet already presented.
   d. The circulation of practical suggestions to individuals, groups, and communities who can and will stimulate the sue of books in wartime.
   e. Watching the developments of other public relations programs to see that books are included and are called upon to do their full part.