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Between the brows: searching for the placement of Marie Corelli's popular fiction

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**BETWEEN THE BROWS: SEARCHING FOR THE PLACEMENT OF MARIE
CORELLI'S POPULAR FICTION**

By

Courtney Kendall

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Courtney Kendall

May 13, 2011

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Marie Corelli's popular 1890s fiction has been considered lowbrow. Contemporary scholarship has attempted to recuperate her work by aligning her texts with high art movements of the nineteenth-century. The two Corelli novels that this thesis examines, *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) and *Wormwood* (1890), construct idealized gender representations through a combination of low and high art stylistics and subject matter. These novels critique modes of consumption that cause characters to deviate from the ideal behavior represented within the text. These characters' deviations from idealized conceptions of masculinity and femininity endanger national identity. This thesis considers the utility of the term middlebrow as a way to reconfigure the divide between low and high art. Furthermore, it argues that Corelli's construction of a gendered national identity reflects the dominant conception of Englishness, providing Victorian studies with a more nuanced distinction between popular nineteenth-century texts. Middlebrow fiction reflects and solidifies national identity, thus offering a lens through which to view Corelli's project.

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Introduction

I think no author ought to judge of another. After all literature is the edifice, and authors are only the working masons . . . and the builders should be too intent on the whole architecture to pause for an instant to criticize each other. Such is my feeling about all art . . . and the only thing I sometimes long for is *fraternity* among all the followers of art—a bond of joyous and sympathetic union should by right, exist among them,—or at least such would be my dream.

Marie Corelli, letter to George Bentley (April 1887)

But the popular writer of a generation, of a given number of years, is never chosen because of his genius. The masses are not logical enough or discriminating enough to choose the best, though they may not always reject the good.

J.M. Stuart-Young, —A Note Upon Marie Corelli,” *Westminster Review* (December 1906)

If one were to consult the average nineteenth-century, middle-class English reader in the 1890s and inquire whether he or she knew of the author Marie Corelli, no doubt the answer would be ‘yes.’ Biographer Brian Masters claims that “[w]hile Queen Victoria was alive, Miss Corelli was the second most famous Englishwoman in the world; afterwards, there was no one to approach her” (6). After Corelli’s death in 1924 her fame slowly died along with her book sales. While alive Corelli enjoyed great success with a wide and varied audience. Her success with literary critics and reviewers, however, was less than favorable. Her novels were frequently sneered at in press reviews, which commonly aligned her popularity with the lower class ‘masses’ and their inferior tastes. The treatment of Marie Corelli and her audience reveals a larger tendency to categorize art along class lines in the late-nineteenth century, which has persisted in twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship on aesthetic value. Seldom is art discussed without creating divisive lines based on aesthetic value. Recent scholarship on the late-nineteenth

century often, though perhaps unintentionally, reinscribes what Andreas Huyssen has termed the Great Divide, or the divide between high and low art. Like so many nineteenth-century debates about literary value, current scholarship almost invariably discusses high and low art as the antithesis of one another. If high art is characterized by a superior aesthetic value, then low art, or, more often, mass culture, is thus inferior.

While much constructive research on popular literature has been done in Victorian studies, the discourse itself frequently seeks to legitimate popular literature's status by finding traits of high art within it or, just as often, devaluing impacts of mass culture altogether. In her study of the Victorian sensation novel, Ann Cvetkovich notes the difficulty of chronicling the historical division of high and low art, namely because contemporary scholarship subscribes to the same divisions as the Victorians:

[M]uch of the contemporary scholarship takes for granted the aesthetic distinction between high and low culture made by the Victorians. . . . Popular genres . . . are consigned to second-rate status through a process that often replicates nineteenth-century discourses suspicious of working-class readers, female audiences, and affectively powerful or nonrealist literature. (15)

Cvetkovich's criticism additionally reveals the corollary between high/low art and the audiences that consume them. Popular literature is frequently associated with supposedly inferior segments of society, such as the working-class and female audiences whom Cvetkovich calls attention to. It is important to realize that the division of art is also a division of the consumers of art. Nineteenth-century and contemporary discourses do not simply find inherent value in the art object, but also in who consumes that art.

Aesthetic value is thus transposed from the art object itself to the audience consuming those objects. Late-Victorian periodicals often separate aesthetic value along class divisions. Despite the fact that scholars on the nineteenth century have begun to attend to popular literature, recent scholarship often perpetuates this division. Pierre Bourdieu's foundational work on aesthetic taste, *Distinction*, analyzes the connection between the social group one belongs to and the similar tastes that group shares. He argues that the aesthetic disposition, —“like every sort of taste, [...] unites and separates. . . . And it distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has . . . and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others” (49). The aesthetic values one holds become quite important in defining oneself and the social group to which one belongs. Yet so often aesthetic value is considered inherent to the art itself: —“The pure [aesthetic] disposition is so universally recognized as legitimate that no voice is heard pointing out that the definition of art . . . is an object of struggle among the classes” (Bourdieu 41). Mass culture, or popular literature, often becomes linked to the lower classes and has been historically devalued because of it. By blindly accepting this division, current scholarship risks misunderstanding historical audiences and perpetuating divisions of aesthetic value. What is perhaps most needed is an understanding of the ways in which high and low art speak *to* each other, rather than remaining strictly divided.

Bestseller Marie Corelli offers an example of how today's scholarship retains a problematic attitude towards popular literature and high art. Decadence, Aestheticism, and the subversive New Woman novels have traditionally been the focus of 1890s scholarship. These movements, particularly Decadence and Aestheticism, are categorized

as high art. Their very philosophy, ‘art for art’s sake,’ indicates a break from the social world and a move towards a far more disinterested attitude towards art. According to the philosophy of Decadence and Aestheticism, art should avoid moral, social, or political issues and instead should be created for the sake of beauty and the emotions. Bourdieu terms this attitude a sort of “moral agnosticism,” which further suggests that this philosophy is reacting against the dominant modes of representation at the time. Bourdieu outlines two strategies for this reaction:

[T]he easiest . . . is to *transgress* ever more radically the ethical censorships which the other classes accept . . . [o]r, more subtly, it is done by conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time. (40)

Either of these strategies illustrates the oppositional attitude towards the dominant aesthetic values of, in this case, the late-Victorian era as exhibited by members of the Aesthetic Movement. By focusing attention on those authors we risk applying the same lens onto popular authors such as Corelli. This becomes problematic when we consider that such popular authors were not considered a part of Victorian high art movements. Trying to associate specifically high art strategies with a popular author’s work ignores the actual project of the popular text in question. It is important to consider the nineteenth-century reception of these texts and the reasons behind that audience’s appreciation of the text in order to fully understand the historical circumstance of the text. If Victorian audiences did not acknowledge a popular text as a participant in Decadence, Aestheticism, or the New Woman movement, then we must resist trying to place that text within those movements.

Marie Corelli's bestselling Victorian novels have attracted considerable attention from recent critics, but scholars often attempt to align her with high art categories that her texts consistently resist. I will later examine the ways in which her texts resist easy placement into categories of high or low art, but first I would like to focus on the problematic approaches commonly taken towards her work. Annette Federico's influential text, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, seeks to locate the source of Corelli's popularity. Federico posits a fundamental question which determines the approach her study will take: —How does Corelli participate in literary decadence, in feminism and New Woman fiction?" (3). Federico's approach thus assumes that Corelli *does* participate in Victorian high art, which leads her to claim that Corelli's dependence on Decadent tropes makes her text a Decadent one. Similarly, Julia Kuehn, in her article —The Strategies of the Popular Novel: Marie Corelli's Feminine Sublime and the Aesthetic of the Dream," employs Freudian dream analysis and the sublime to analyze Corelli's *Ardath* (1889). Kuehn admits that this approach to —Corelli's work may denote moments of high culture," and these models certainly do signal an attempt to place Corelli's text within the category of high culture (976). Cvetkovich refers to the sublime as —the high-culture version of affect," a term meant to denote a higher emotional state. The Romantic tradition of the sublime and Freudian dream analysis are frequently discussed as aesthetic states transcending reality, which indicates the philosophical reactions common to high art. The projects of Federico and Kuehn impose high art categories upon Corelli's works rather than attending to her texts in the context of popular literature. In effect, they bring high art techniques or stylistics to

popular literature instead of analyzing Corelli's project apart from these modes of representation.

Neither scholar intends to simplify Corelli's texts by merely placing them into a high art paradigm. Federico ultimately argues for a continuum between ~~the~~ consummately aesthetic and the utterly bourgeois," finding in Corelli an example of multiple strands of Aestheticism (93). Kuehn, after claiming that her approach may appear to link Corelli to high culture, then maintains that ~~—this~~ signals in no way the attempt to claim Corelli for high art" (976). Instead, Kuehn's argument is that Corelli ~~—manipulates~~ certain concepts for a popular context" (976). But these are merely good intentions that are relegated to the beginning or end of the analysis. The analysis itself is deeply involved in demonstrating how Corelli's texts employ these high art techniques, and, thus, fit into established patterns of high culture. The attempt to resist perpetuating binary divisions of high and low art is ultimately weakened by applying high art models to popular literature. The attempt comes to resemble aesthetic value distinctions in which popular literature needs to be legitimated because of its devalued status. The distinctions between high and low art are maintained through their aesthetic devaluation.

Texts themselves do not always fall into the low or high side of the Great Divide. In *After the Great Divide*, Huyssen traces several historical examples to show that ~~—there~~ has been a succession of attempts launched from either side to bridge the gap or at least to appropriate elements of the other" (16). The opposition from within, Huyssen claims, has proved surprisingly resilient. He concludes that this resilience may suggest that the two cannot do without one another; perhaps ~~—the~~ much heralded mutual exclusiveness is really a sign of their secret interdependence" (16). Aesthetic value is primarily a

negation. Bourdieu explains that “tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes” (49). Our aesthetic values are thus defined against what we devalue. Therefore, low and high art are the negation of the other and cannot exist independently.

I would like to keep this in mind when examining 1890s texts by Marie Corelli. Instead of asking how she participates in high culture—which is to take her texts outside of the devalued mass culture with which they are associated—I would prefer to ask how she incorporates what we commonly refer to as low and high art. In other words, I would like to consider how she utilizes strategies and subjects that are commonly associated with low or high art. Corelli’s texts, which reached a wide and varied audience, offer a fascinating look at the interplay between high and low culture. Examining her texts emphasizes how distinctions between these categories of art can become blurred. Through the use of subjects and stylistics that borrow from both high and low art, I will demonstrate how two of Corelli’s texts construct a representation of ideal British men and women. The gender ideals represented are further linked to nineteenth-century conceptions of Englishness. Corelli’s texts critique modes of consumption that cause men and women to deviate from what is represented as ideal behavior; this in turn endangers national identity and the health of the nation. Due to the immense popularity of her fiction, Corelli’s texts offer a close look at the dominant conception of Englishness and its connection to gender. In an effort to separate popular literature from its devalued status, I would like to examine a term commonly used in scholarship on the twentieth

century as a way in which to understand those texts that are not easily categorized as high or low art: the middlebrow.

The term middlebrow has been used in a variety of different contexts, but usually to designate a body of United States (occasionally British), middle-class literature. The term itself is quite seductive in that it offers itself as a catch-all phrase for literature or culture that resists easy placement into categories of high or low. Too often scholars focus on highbrow movements, such as Modernism, to the detriment of popular texts. The vast numbers of texts which do not fall under highbrow categorizations often become lumped together, resulting in oversights of their various nuanced distinctions. Recognizing and naming middlebrow fiction is motivated by a desire to demarcate those texts that fall into an ambiguous space that can neither be described as high nor low art, while simultaneously acknowledging contemporary assumptions about historical class and literary value. Marie Corelli's work seems suited to the application of such a term, but scholars are not quite in agreement on a solid definition of middlebrow fiction. The usage and characteristics of the middlebrow category are frequently fraught with indecision often centering upon the historical usage of the term and its distinct qualities.

Positioning the Middlebrow

Scholars who focus on American and British middlebrow fiction tend to place its historical emergence in the earlier half of the twentieth century. First used in the 1920s by British magazine *Punch*, the term is not commonly found until Virginia Woolf's derision of the middlebrow in an unpublished letter to the *New Statesman* in 1932.¹ Woolf's essay, simply entitled "Middlebrow," applauds the interdependence between the highbrow and

¹ The essay was later published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth* (1942).

lowbrow. Highbrow and lowbrow individuals, according to Woolf, complement one another in such a way that one cannot exist without the other (179). The lowbrow, a ~~man~~ or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life,” desires to be shown what life looks like (178). Woolf claims that the highbrows are the only people who can show them because highbrows do not do things, and thus ~~are~~ the only people who can see things being done” (179). The nature of the highbrow is to pursue ideas, yet they are ~~wholly~~ incapable of dealing successfully with what is called real life” (178). The middlebrow, however, interferes in the relationship between the two brows.

While she has definite ideas concerning what is and is not lowbrow or highbrow, Woolf’s grasp of the middlebrow is slightly more complex: —They are neither one thing nor the other” (179). The in-between status of the middlebrow, in Woolf’s opinion, seems to be best explained by their association with the marketplace:

The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred [sic] intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige. (180)

Woolf’s critique of the middlebrow’s affiliation with the commodification of literature anticipates later critiques focusing on the middlebrow’s connections with commerce. This connection would in turn become the greatest cause for the belittlement of the middlebrow. The middlebrow’s hedge-sauntering culminates in an attempt to please both lowbrows and highbrows: —The middlebrow curries favour with both sides equally. He

goes to the lowbrows and tells them that while he is not quite one of them, he is almost their friend. Next moment he rings up the highbrows and asks them with equal geniality whether he may not come to tea” (180). The vacillation of the middlebrow applies not only to a particular category of people but, as I will later demonstrate through Marie Corelli’s fiction, also applies to productions of middlebrow art.

As a fundamental critique of the middlebrow, Woolf’s essay has been influential in determining the historical boundaries of the middlebrow genre. Contemporary scholars are therefore more likely to discuss middlebrow fiction as a post-World War II phenomenon. Scholarship has slowly contested this placement, continually pushing its origins backward toward the beginning of the twentieth century. Nicola Humble, in her study of British middlebrow fiction, argues that we should consider extending the timeline from the end of World War I to the 1950s. Her discussion in *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* challenges the traditional convention that sets World War II ~~as~~ a decisive ideological and cultural break,” necessitating the distinction of a middlebrow culture (4). Similarly, Ann Ardis argues for an even earlier application for middlebrow fiction in *Modernism and Cultural Conflict 1880-1922*. Ardis makes the compelling case that the ~~etymology~~ of [middlebrow] should not lead us to conclude . . . that the phenomenon did not exist prior to its naming as such” (116). Ardis uses the work of Netta Syrett to show that middlebrow fiction—defined by Ardis as what modernist avant-gardism was *not*—can easily be seen in Edwardian writers.

Most relevant to this study is Teresa Mangum’s work on New Woman writer Sarah Grand. Mangum explains the connection between many New Woman novels, and their ~~pre~~occupation with doing cultural work for but also with a widespread, middle-

class audience,” and what would later be termed middlebrow fiction (18). Mangum employs Nigel Cross’s proposal that changes in book publishing and readership in the 1880s first created the divisions of middlebrow and highbrow literature. Cross argues that these divisions were also a cultural response to Matthew Arnold’s —mission for literature, a ‘browning up’ of newly middle-class readers who had aspirations to climb socially by way of a cultural ladder but a ladder available at affordable prices” (Mangum 18). Susan Bernstein, in “Dirty Reading: Sensation Fiction, Women, and Primitivism,” points out that the terms lowbrow and highbrow derive from Victorian anthropological categories that claimed the higher position of the brow indicated a later evolution coupled with superior intelligence (235). Those with higher brows were said to have a greater intelligence and achievement in art, while lower brows indicated less intelligence and unsophisticated taste.²

Such arguments convincingly suggest that middlebrow is *not* simply a twentieth-century phenomenon. Several characteristics of the middlebrow need to be elucidated before this becomes entirely clear, however. One common finding among scholars interested in middlebrow fiction is that middlebrow as a movement came about due to an increasing democratization of literature. Joan Shelley Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*, and Nicola Humble’s above-mentioned study have all located their discussions of middlebrow fiction in the changing identities of the middle class and historical reasons for a new burgeoning readership. Their studies, of course, are

² For additional discussions of the Victorian anthropological distinctions see Nigel Cross’s *The Common Writer*, Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, and Ina Habermann’s *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow: Priestly, du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness*.

all concerned with the twentieth century and rely heavily upon social changes triggered by the advent of the World Wars. While distinctly different from the late-nineteenth century, there are nevertheless similar changes to be found in late-Victorian publishing practices and readership. The collapse of the three-decker novel in 1895, and the subsequent shift from what N.N. Feltes describes as a petty-commodity mode of production to a capitalist literary mode of production, made purchasing books more accessible. In addition, several scholars have also pointed out that the 1870 Education Act, which made education compulsory, also increased the amount of readers. While Raymond Williams has argued in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* that “1870 is in fact very questionable as a decisive date,” claiming that “[t]here had been widespread literacy much earlier than this,” debates in late-Victorian periodicals regarding new mass readership shows that the 1870 Act still raised contemporary concerns regarding a new mass readership (326).

In addition to an increased readership, scholars often echo Virginia Woolf’s opinion of the middlebrow and discuss the increased commodification of middlebrow fiction. For instance, Radway’s study of the American Book-of-the-Month club shows that the middlebrow’s ties to the economic marketplace posed the most serious threat to highbrow culture. Radway argues that the Book-of-the-Month Club’s advertising “strategies threatened to rework the very notion of culture itself as a thing autonomous and transcendent, set apart and timeless, defined by its very difference and distance from the market” (128). The middlebrow’s affiliation with the marketplace threatened the notion of literature as a marker of culture separate from the economic realm. Radway thus argues that the “scandal” of the middlebrow was its “failure to maintain the fences

cordoning off culture from commerce” (152). Mangum’s “turn-of-the-century middlebrow” was also associated with “mass commercial success” and trivialized by academics, reviewers, and intellectuals as “consumer-driven” (21). Thus, many middlebrow writers were accused of catering to a mass audience instead of creating literature for art’s sake.

Most scholars argue that middlebrow fiction was often written by and for a middle-class audience. Humble finds that the 1920s-1950s middlebrow fiction she discusses was considered “middlebrow not because of any intrinsic content, but because it was widely read by the middle-class public” (13). Humble differs from the majority of scholars, however, in that she believes it was particularly the lower-middle classes who read middlebrow fiction. Radway, Rubin, and Rosa Bracco all argue that middlebrow authors were typically from the middle class and addressed that specific audience.

Middlebrow fiction is thus a convenient vehicle for discussing fiction that achieved significant commercial success and, as a corollary, was read by a wide middle-class audience. I would like to point out that these are common characteristics most widely acknowledged by scholars on the middlebrow. These characteristics can also be easily applied to late-Victorian popular fiction. Yet there are numerous specifics that are also accredited to middlebrow fiction, though scholars do not seem to agree on much beyond popularity with a middle-class audience. One characteristic that I find especially important concerns the purpose of middlebrow fiction. Middlebrow has often been derided due to its anti-intellectuality. It is often argued that middlebrow fiction is read for pure pleasure or entertainment. Studies of middlebrow fiction, however, have not been entirely unified on this viewpoint. Nicola Humble sets middlebrow fiction against reading

for instruction due to the former's privileging of passivity: "The problem with instructive reading is its potential for earnestness: the biggest social sin, in the middlebrow imagination, is that of taking oneself too seriously. More approved is the act of reading for pleasure" (48). According to such arguments, middlebrow fiction is generally escapist in nature and unconcerned with the more serious social matters that might be addressed in a New Woman novel, for instance.

Yet it may not be that middlebrow fiction *itself* is concerned with pleasure over instruction or social improvement. Mangum notes that it was the "Victorian gatekeepers of culture" that trivialized such fiction as "escapist, and entertaining rather than improving" (21). Even in studies that do not specifically call attention to an instructional or improving aspect of middlebrow fiction, there are signs that it is still present. For instance, Ardis' work on Netta Syrett hinges on seeing a New Woman critique carrying over in her fiction from the fin-de-siècle. Radway's gentle critique of middlebrow fiction (one of the few she offers) also gestures towards social or political engagement: "[T]oo often the solution [middlebrow books] ventured with respect to serious social problems involved the moral, ethical, and spiritual rehabilitation of the individual subject alone" (13). And Jennifer Shepherd, in "Marketing Middlebrow Feminism: Elizabeth von Arnim, the New Woman, and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Book Market," furthers this point by claiming that middlebrow cultural formation was "identified by its commitment to popularizing fiction as an instrument of social pedagogy" (111). Thus, many scholars echo Tad Friend's retort to contemporary critics of middlebrow: "[M]iddlebrow not only entertains, it educates—pleasurably training us to appreciate high art" ("The Case for Middlebrow" 132). But as the above examples show, middlebrow fiction as a purveyor of

social critique is more implied in individual scholar's projects than directly stated. The assumption that middlebrow fiction is simply designed for pleasure or entertainment is rarely challenged in recent scholarship.

Superficial Sweetness: Middlebrow Fiction and National Identity

The tendency of middlebrow fiction to engage in social and political critiques correlates with the nineteenth-century didactic tradition. Stemming from the late-eighteenth century, this tradition has often been employed as a vehicle for social and political engagement. One has only to look at popular authors such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell to see this tradition's presence in the nineteenth century. The Victorians understood popular culture not necessarily in terms of escapist entertainment, but as instructional devices. Dennis Denisoff, in his chapter on popular culture in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, points out that

it was common during the Victorian era to use the term "popular culture" to refer not to the practices, values and entertainments favoured by a considerable portion of the general population but to those that the middle classes advocated as tools for giving those people whom they saw as beneath them civilizing and moral inspiration. (137)

Of course, this came with its own contemporary critiques. Henry Harland, in a letter to the editor in *The Yellow Book*, compared the popular novel *Trilby* (1894) with Mother Seigel's syrup, a pseudo-medicine claiming to cure a vast variety of complaints. Harland used the syrup to function as a metaphor –for popular entertainment that operates as a cure-all whose superficial sweetness dangerously conceals the long-term effects of

commercial exploitation” (Denisoff 144). This further illustrates the connections between the twentieth-century middlebrow’s affiliations with “mass commercial success” and similar Victorian concerns regarding the blurred boundaries between literature and the economic marketplace. But what is even more important is that Victorian popular culture was discussed in terms that demonstrate its engagement with contemporary social and/or political concerns. For Ina Habermann, the function of middlebrow narratives “is neither mere escapism—whatever that may be—and light entertainment, nor intellectual challenge through aesthetic innovation.” Rather, he describes middlebrow as “an imaginative projection of lived experience conducive to a negotiation of identity and emotional ‘entertainment’ in the sense of providing sustenance” (*Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow* 35). Thus, there are far more complexities to consider when discussing the middlebrow’s function beyond entertainment value. The middlebrow’s nature complicates the claim that it functions merely for pleasure. Its sweetness clearly contains the tonic of social and political engagement, as evidenced by the above discussion on the work by Ardis, Radway, and Shepherd. Furthermore, the negotiation of identity that occurs through the middlebrow’s projection of lived experience creates a space that offers a discussion of cultural identity in addition to pleasure.

The projection of lived experience often results in a negotiation of collective identities. Denisoff’s discussion of T.C. Horsfall may serve as an example. Using Horsfall’s text, “Painting and Popular Culture” (1880), Denisoff demonstrates that Horsfall “leaves his readers with a notion of popular culture as a mode of mass edification that elevates the collective morality of the nation and reinforces its political cohesion on the international stage” (139). Popular culture, in this instance, thus draws

together individual identities in an attempt to create a relationship based on a collective identity – in this example, a national identity. The relationship between art and national identity was quite strong in the Victorian era. Annette Federico, drawing on nineteenth-century essays on contemporary literature, shows that “[f]ar from being innocuous amusement for the middle class, art and literature were seen as vital to the nation’s political health” (*Idol of Suburbia* 59). Many middle-class Victorians felt that art stood as a symbol for their national character.

Popular and, by extension, middlebrow fiction are perfect instruments for the distribution of a national ideology. I am interested in using popular fiction to mean fiction that has been sold and distributed in large numbers without its common association to the lowbrow. The significant commercial success of the middlebrow illustrates that it was popular in this sense. Since the Victorian era lacks such a term, I am intentionally collapsing popular and middlebrow in this instance to show that national ideologies can be promulgated through popular texts. Due to their popular nature, it is most likely that these ideologies were the most widely accepted in their time. Habermann finds that the study of middlebrow literature “promises important cultural insights since its widely disseminated products negotiate and express the values, world views and mentalities of a large part of the population” (32). Middlebrow fiction thus serves as a reflection of cultural and national identity primarily due to its ability to attract the largest amount (and widest spectrum) of readers.

Middlebrow fiction, and not necessarily all popular fiction, tends to reach a widely varied audience. Tad Friend’s chapter on the middlebrow, though speaking of America, claims that “[m]iddlebrow, which appeals across barriers of age or station,

composes our national identity” (138). The class barriers Friend mentions are especially pertinent when considering an author such as Marie Corelli. Denisoff’s discussion of popular culture again provides a clarifying point. He argues that, for the Victorians, popular culture was a “realm of strategic contest through which the masses were to be shaped in accord with middle-class interests and values” (153). The Victorians are not the only ones who assume the “masses” are synonymous with the lower class, however. This can also be said of contemporary scholars who assume that popular culture was mainly enjoyed by the lower class. However, Marie Corelli’s audience clearly refutes this notion. As discussed by various biographers and critics such as Brian Masters, Teresa Ransom, and Annette Federico, Corelli’s readers ranged from scullery maids to the Queen herself.³ The wide range of her audience indicates that her subjects and treatment of subjects represents a dominant ideology of the time that crossed class barriers. We cannot accurately say that Corelli’s texts represent a dominant *middle-class* ideology. Instead, we should acknowledge that the social and political critiques that Corelli’s texts endorse represent a dominant ideology that was accepted by portions of all classes. Thus, we can infer that a large and varied segment of the Victorian population accepted the national collective identity that her texts promoted.

Wormwood and the Poisonous Influence of France

In Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood* (1890) social influences create significant effects which in turn influence the collective identity of national citizens. The text further portrays ideal conceptions of masculinity and the social influences that cause men to

³ See Brian Masters’s *Now Barrabas Was a Rotter*, Teresa Ransom’s *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, and Annette Federico’s *Idol of Suburbia*.

degenerate from this ideal. Because of this degeneration, *Wormwood* contends that the well-being of the nation is compromised. The text depicts a debased French absintheur who represents the corruption of national character elicited by the influence of absinthe. The connection between absinthe and French literature offered an additional concern for British citizens across the Channel.

While English literature had frequently borrowed from French influences, the school of Realism and Naturalism in the late-nineteenth century caused concern for a majority of British citizens. The frank manner with which these novels treated their topics—often considered obscene—offended the popular idea that art ought to represent the ideal. Anti-French sentiment reached climatic heights in the 1880s, primarily due to the publication of translations of Emile Zola. In his address to the House of Commons, member of Parliament, Samuel Smith, claimed that realist literature had “overspread [France] like a torrent, and its poison was destroying the whole national life. . . . Such garbage was simply death to a nation.” In 1889 the *Times* reported that “the effects of general and unrestrained absinthe drinking in France are coming to be recognized as forming the basis of one of the gravest dangers that now threaten the physical and moral welfare of the people” (qtd. in “*Fin-de-Siècle* Francophobia” 69, 77). French literature and the French habit of drinking absinthe were contemporary concerns even for those across the Channel. Absinthe itself was often linked to the authors of Realist or Naturalist literature. The dangers French literature and absinthe both posed to national health worried British citizens who feared the contagion would spread.

The connection between these French habits and national health were frequently discussed in common conversation in Britain. *Wormwood* represents one conversation of

many concerning this well-known topic. Corelli's introductory preface to *Wormwood* explicitly connects French art with a depraved national character: "The shop-windows and bookstalls of Paris are themselves sufficient witnesses of the national taste in art and literature,—a national taste for vice and indecent vulgarity which cannot be too sincerely and compassionately deplored" (61). Corelli agrees that there may be many causes for the "wretchedly low standard of moral responsibility and fine feeling displayed by the Parisians of to-day," but her particular focus is on "the reckless Absinthe-mania, which pervades all classes, rich and poor alike" (61). The consumption of absinthe, in Corelli's opinion, is to be blamed for the degeneration of the national morality and literature of the nation. But her novel is not meant to be a mere voyeuristic exposition of France's decline. Corelli's purpose is clearly to warn Britain that the absinthe-mania and all of its implied terrors could easily spread across the Channel: "French habits, French fashions, French books, French pictures, are particularly favoured by the English, and who can predict that French drug-drinking shall not also become *à la mode* in Britain?" (62). Her portrayal of the absintheur's decline into madness is thus presented to the reader as a cautionary tale very much concerned with the national health of Britain.

While *Wormwood* makes specific claims about France's degenerate state, the reason for the country's degeneracy often concerns gender. Absinthe turns the ideal man into a fiend, which in turn affects the collective identity of France. *Wormwood*'s narrator, Gaston Beauvais, only begins drinking absinthe after his fiancée, Pauline, informs him that she loves another man, the priest Silvion Guidèl. At first, Gaston resolves to help the lovers by withdrawing from his engagement to Pauline and helping the pair marry. While making this decision he ponders over the "more natural plan of vengeance," which would

involve disgracing Pauline and killing Silvion. Instead, he asks himself whether ~~a~~ true man [should] be ready and willing to sacrifice himself, if by so doing, he can render the one woman he loves in all the world, happy?" (157). Gaston eventually ~~won~~ the mastery over [his] darker passions" and decides to exhibit what seems to be manly self-control (158). At this point Gaston's actions represent those of an ideal gentleman who can control his darker emotions and be willing to sacrifice himself for the opposite sex. Absinthe changes this quite quickly. The man responsible for Gaston's turn to absinthe, Andrè Gessonex, is an artist ~~who~~ painted pictures that were too extraordinary and *risqué* for any respectable householder to buy" (159). Andrè offers to provide a remedy for his friend's woes: ~~For~~ the poison of memory I can provide an antidote,—a blessed balm that soothes the wronged spirit into total forgetfulness of its injury, and opens before the mind a fresh and wondrous field of vision" (164). After Gaston downs a second glass Andrè claims: ~~Now~~ you will soon be a man again!" (167). Andrè's view of man's best qualities stand in stark contrast to Gaston's previous view of manly sacrifice: ~~The~~ hate well is the most manly of attributes" (168). What seems to be in conflict are the qualities of being a man—specifically, an ideal man. Absinthe is thus conveyed as an elixir that changes men into something quite different from the self-controlled, sacrificial man. It turns Gaston into a hateful, revengeful man unlike his former self. The meeting with Andrè leaves Gaston believing that it had given the Devil time to ~~consume~~ virtue in a breath and conjure up vice from the dead ashes—to turn a feeling heart to stone—and to make of a man a fiend!" (172). The narrator's words indicate that absinthe transforms him so that he is no longer a true man.

Gaston's initial verbal claims become actions that indicate Gaston has strayed from ideal manhood and degenerated into a creature of the streets. After the first consumption of absinthe Gaston embarks on a vengeful path by exposing Pauline publicly at what was supposed to be their wedding, then later murdering Silvion. The "darker passions" Gaston had formerly won mastery over give way after consuming absinthe and becoming an absintheur. After telling her of Silvion's murder, Pauline grows distraught and jumps to her death into the river. After this Gaston slowly sinks into what he describes as a "slinking, shuffling beast, half monkey, half man" (363). By the end Gaston becomes less of a man and more of a Parisian creature: "At night I creep out with the other obscene things of Paris, and by my very presence, add fresh pollution to the moral poisons in the air!" (363). He unmistakably links his downfall to his consumption of absinthe by claiming that he is an "[a]bsintheur, pur et simple!—voilà tout! I am a thing more abject than the lowest beggar that crawls through Paris whining for a soul!" (363). His degenerate status is thus represented as the effect of his absinthe habit, which transforms him from the gentleman he used to be.

Wormwood also takes care to show the connection between absinthe and the degeneration of France. Gaston indicates that he is unable to help "poor France, thou beaten and disowned fair empress of nations" precisely because of his absinthe habit, which makes him unable to be "roused to swift action in time" to save his nation" (78). His love for France has not abated for in his dreams of battle fields he has "waded deep in the blood of our enemies, and wrested back from [the Germans'] grasp Alsace-Lorraine" (78). He dreams of reclaiming France's loss and its glory, but in his absinthe stupor he

acknowledges that he cannot be roused to action in order to save France. The fall of France is in turn associated with absinthe due to its influence on the nation's citizens:

Poor France . . .—there are some of her sons still left who would give their life blood to see her rise up in her old glory, and be again what she once was. . . . But alas!—it is not because of the German conquest,—nor because she has had foolish rulers, that she has fallen and is still falling,—it is because the new morals and opinions of the age, propounded and accepted by narrow-minded, superficial, and materialistic thinkers, breed in her a nest of vipers and scorpions instead of men. (303)

Wormwood argues that national policies are not the cause of France's fall, but the effects of new ideas on the nation's citizens, which in turn transforms them from men to creatures. Absinthe, which does the same, is thus just one vehicle by which French men become degenerate and harm the national health of France.

Wormwood offers a projection of lived experience that is then explicitly linked with a national ideology. Corelli portrays Gaston as a representative of French citizens who have contributed to the decline of the national morality and health of France. The above analysis further shows that she additionally accomplishes this through a discussion of the ideal or proper masculine attributes. If absinthe takes away from Gaston's manhood, then it additionally cripples France. Instead of the ideal men that would be needed to bring France to its former glory, absinthe and new morals breed degenerate creatures. Contemporary social forms of consumption are the cause of the degenerate citizens, who in turn affect the national health of the entire country.

„Lax Morals and Prurient Literature“: *The Sorrows of Satan* and „Fashionable Fiction“

The Sorrows of Satan (1895) echoes *Wormwood*‘s critiques of cultural consumption and their connections to the nation‘s health. The novel furthers idealistic representations of gender, but shows in this instance how women are corrupted by British novels. *The Sorrows of Satan* criticizes nineteenth-century fiction as a demoralizing influence on young British women. By examining the contribution these two texts make towards promoting a specific gendered identity, we can again see the relation between corruptive modes of consumption and their subsequent endangerment to the nation as a whole.

Though *Wormwood* may include derisive comments about the „age of Realism and Zola,“ no Corelli novel attacks late-nineteenth century literature quite like *The Sorrows of Satan*. The novel focuses on Geoffrey Tempest, an unknown would-be author, and his sudden fortune and connection to Lucio Rimânez—the devil in disguise. In between Geoffrey‘s various adventures *The Sorrows of Satan* addresses corruption in literary magazines, misleading advertising methods, bluestocking stereotypes, and the modern social novel. The latter provides an interesting contrast to the Realist literature addressed in *Wormwood*, yet shows a comparable link between literature and its effects on the behavior of British citizens.

The reading habits of the character Sibyl Elton offer an example of how Britain‘s own literature was viewed as a corrupting influence upon young, upper-class women who indulge in fashionable literature. This upper-class beauty, whom Geoffrey woos, engages in „fashionable novel-reading“ (146). She describes such reading as „[b]ooks that go into

the details of the lives of outcasts . . .—that explain and analyse the secret vices of men . . .—that advocate almost as a duty ‘free love’ and universal polygamy,” as well as those that advocate heroines who “boldly [seek] out a man, *any* man, in order that she may have a child by him, without the ‘degradation’ of marrying him” (146). The former two attributes could be ascribed to Realism, while the latter typically refer to subjects that were often addressed in New Woman novels. Sibyl’s reading habits are connected with those of her social class, who she claims are all the same: “do not say you could find a girl better than I am; I do not think you could in *my* ‘set,’ because we are all alike, . . .—filled with the same merely sensual and materialistic views of life and its responsibilities as the admired heroines of the ‘society’ novels we read” (147). Upper-class women like Sibyl read the fashionable novels of the time, “encouraged by the ‘literary censors’ of the time” (294). These fashionable novels contain subjects that were frequently viewed to be as scandalous and obscene as French Realism and Naturalism.

The Sorrows of Satan contends that the consumption of these novels leads to a loss of innocence and idealism. Sibyl describes herself as “a contaminated creature, trained to perfection in the lax morals and prurient literature of [her] day” (147). Furthermore, she confesses that she has “implied, consciously or unconsciously, that complete contempt of life and disbelief in a God, which is the chief theme of nearly all the social teachings of the time” (147). Lacking in morals and faith, Sibyl is “passionate, resentful, impetuous,—frequently unsympathetic, and inclined to morbidness and melancholy” and, according to the text, has fashionable literature to thank for making her that way (147). Geoffrey, rather saddened by Sibyl’s revelation, wishes she didn’t have such “strange” ideas to which Sibyl replies: “You think them strange? . . . You should

not,—in these new women‘ days! I believe that, thanks to newspapers, magazines and decadent‘ novels, I am in all respects eminently fitted to be a wife!” Sibyl’s view of marriage, that she be “sold to the highest bidder,” is the attitude she takes when agreeing to marry Geoffrey, whom she does not love (148). Love, according to Sibyl, doesn’t exist: “Ideal love is dead,—and worse than dead, being out of fashion” (148). Literature, then, serves as a conduit for the education of young women. *The Sorrows of Satan* presents the argument that late-nineteenth century literary genres such as Decadent, Realist, or New Woman novels unhealthily influence women.

This connection between such literature and the moral health of women is further shown in Sibyl’s suicide note. After marrying Geoffrey, then proclaiming her love to Lucio and suffering rejection, Sibyl drinks poison and writes a lengthy suicide note that details the reasons behind her behavior and personality. One prime reason she offers is her consumption of literature. As a secluded child, she read a great deal: “All the fashionable fiction of the day passed through my hands, much to my gradual enlightenment, if not to my edification” (294). She was eventually exposed to Swinburne, “expecting to enjoy the usual sublime emotions which it is the privilege and glory of the poet to inspire in mortals less divinely endowed than himself” (295). However, Swinburne is not portrayed as one of those poets. Sibyl’s note reads that she believes “there are many women to whom his works have been deadlier than the deadliest poison, and far more soul-corrupting than any book of Zola’s or the most pernicious of modern French writers” (295). Poison may be the cause of Sibyl’s death, but Decadent British authors such as Swinburne are represented as corrupters of souls. *The Sorrows of Satan*

demonstrates the moral fall of woman due to the influence of New Woman and Decadent fiction.

If *Wormwood* associates a popular liquor with the debasement of French morals and literature, then *The Sorrows of Satan*'s association of Decadent and New Woman British fiction with the debasement of British morals equally presents the case that art and the nation are intricately connected in literature. Both of these novels present an experience that extends beyond the individual experiences of, for instance, Gaston Beauvais and Sibyl Elton. It should be clear from my analysis that these characters' positions are represented as symptomatic of larger social depravities. Corelli does not represent Gaston as an individual gone awry due to disappointed love. Rather, he claims to be "a man who is . . . only one example out of a thousand; a thousand? ay, more than a thousand like him, who in this very city are possessed by the same seductive delirium, and are pressing on swiftly to the same predestined end!" (73). Nor is Sibyl represented as a solitary individual, but one of many in her "set" that enjoy the novels literary critics recommend. Both are presented as depraved individuals like many others who are faulty due to the troublesome forms of nineteenth-century consumption.

This is how Marie Corelli's texts contain social and political critiques. By portraying her characters as corrupted beings, the text criticizes the cultural influences that lead to their corruption. The texts' critique of contemporary modes of consumption demonstrates that their negative influence extends to the endangerment of the nation's health. Since both Gaston and Sibyl represent one of many individuals contaminated by nineteenth-century forms of consumption, it is clear that the texts argue that many men and women are being corrupted. Consuming French absinthe or Decadent and New

Woman British fiction debases the characters and, by extension, numerous French and British citizens. Corelli shows that the demoralization of those citizens greatly affects the overall well-being of their nation. As in *Wormwood*, *The Sorrows of Satan* illustrates that demoralization through the representation of idealistically gendered characters and their deviation from that idealistic way of being.

In both novels Corelli positions her characters against specific, idealistic ways of being gendered. Gaston is no longer a proper man due to absinthe's influence. Sibyl's femininity is set against the popular authoress Mavis Clare, who represents the ideal of womanhood. Geoffrey contrasts the two after his marriage to Sibyl:

I watched them as they went,—my wife, tall and stately, attired in the newest and most fashionable mode,—Mavis, small and slight, with her soft white gown and floating waist ribbon—the one sensual, the other spiritual,—the one base and vicious in desire,—the other pure-souled and aspiring to noblest ends. (233)

Neither Gaston nor Sibyl are properly gendered, meaning that Corelli presents them as antitheses to an ideal conception of manhood and womanhood, respectively. The reasons they are not properly gendered are due to their separate forms of consumption. Absinthe transforms Gaston so that he is no longer a self-controlled, sacrificial man. Fashionable British fiction changes Sibyl so that she can never be the proper feminine model that Mavis Clare represents.

Examining the critique of literature's influence on national character next to these idealizations shows that Corelli's promulgation of specific ways of being masculine or feminine relate to national character. According to these novels, one cannot be a proper

French man or British woman if one is influenced by the debasing habits and literature of late-Victorian culture. If these modes of consumption create degenerate citizens, then the nation which they are a part of will undoubtedly suffer. The creation of an idealistic gendered national identity within these texts offers an insightful representation of a dominant national ideology due to their popularity with such a varied audience.

Middlebrow fiction, as discussed earlier, serves as a convincing reflection of cultural and national identity due to the sheer amount of its readers. It may be tempting to categorize Corelli's texts as middlebrow due to their commercial success and social critiques, as well as the reflection of national identity found so often within them. However, it would first be helpful to examine the competing poles, lowbrow and highbrow, in order to consider how others have placed her texts and how her texts consistently resist these placements.

The Sensational and Romantic Marie Corelli among the Masses

Corelli's reception among nineteenth-century literary critics was often fraught with contention. There were those critics who found very little to praise within her novels, such as an October 1895 article from *Review of Reviews*: “[O]r would it be surprising if an unthinking reader mistook ‘The Sorrows of Satan’ for what its author describes as ‘the loathliest of the prurient novels that have been lately written by women to degrade and shame their sex’” (qtd. in *Sorrows* 379). Others, such as a January 1891 review in *Literary World*, praised her texts effusively: “In *Wormwood*, Miss Corelli has scored a real success, employing to a worthy end an art in the line of the most popular French writers” (qtd. in *Wormwood* 381). But whether the critics praised or vilified her

texts, Marie Corelli's vast popularity was not to be debated. *The Sorrows of Satan*, published in the new one-volume format, sold approximately seventy thousand copies in its first year alone, making the novel arguably one of the first best-sellers.⁴

The nineteenth-century critics' opinions have been used by Kirsten MacLeod to illustrate Corelli's appeal to both middle and highbrow tastes. In *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle*, MacLeod demonstrates that ~~middlebrow~~ periodicals⁵—those that pruriently engaged in Corelli's examination of Decadence while applauding her moralistic treatment of the subject—praised *Wormwood*, taking it as a realistic representation of the Decadent type" (88). MacLeod further explains that highbrow periodicals such as the *Athenaeum* and the *Academy* also praised the novel's realism, though not necessarily the moral: ~~To~~ proponents of Decadence . . . such moralizing had no place in a literature which, in Havelock Ellis's view, was in need of treating the facts of life with . . . frankness and boldness characteristic of the French novel" (89). From MacLeod's observations, it could be said that middlebrow taste approved of the moralistic treatment of a Decadent subject, while highbrow taste approved of the attempt at Realism.

Though MacLeod does not use the term lowbrow, her claim that ~~Corelli's~~ moralistic discourse and her sensationalism mark her as a producer of low art for the masses" creates ambiguities between the brows. At this point, it seems that the moral of *Wormwood* marks Corelli's text as low and middlebrow. I would attribute this to the conflation of, for example, middlebrow tastes with middlebrow periodicals. It would

⁴ For an in-depth discussion of the publication of *The Sorrows of Satan* see N.N Feltes's *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*.

⁵ It should be noted that MacLeod uses the terms middlebrow and highbrow causally without addressing their historical placement or meaning.

seem appropriate to do so—after all, what sort of taste would a middlebrow periodical have?—but it is clear that the distinctions between brows needs more attention. I will attempt to do so by examining what is prominently considered to be a marker of low culture: Sensationalism.

Victorian Sensationalism typically referred to literature that was exciting, violent, and/or startling. Sensationalism aimed to create a strong impression in the reader and to produce affect. It often manifested in what one critic referred to as *Wormwood*'s “eloquently vigorous language” (qtd. *Wormwood* 379). Ann Cvetkovich's influential study explains that Victorian

Sensationalism had flourished among publications for the lower classes. . . . A taste for such literature now seemed to have invaded more respectable spheres, and the extraordinary success of the sensation novel compelled the critics to distinguish between popularity and literary value. (16)

As Cvetkovich points out, contemporary scholarship continues this distinction: “It is still the case that popular culture is often dismissed as sensationalist, on the assumption that representations that exaggerate reality or create extreme, and hence false, emotional responses are aesthetically inferior, morally suspect, or politically retrograde” (6). Sensationalism has thus been associated with the lower class by both Victorian and contemporary critics. Gothic and crime fiction, shilling shockers, penny dreadfuls, and melodramas were all such genres grouped together as sensationalist literature—a particularly lowbrow form.

It is not difficult to identify moments of sensation in Corelli's texts. The entire scene in which Lucio exposes his true nature to Geoffrey in *The Sorrows of Satan* is highly sensationalist:

Again my eyes reverted to the Mover of this mystic scene. . . . A fiery glory blazed about him. . . . Round us the moonlit landscape was spread like a glittering dream of fairy-land,—and still the unknown bird of God sang on with such entrancing tenderness as must have soothed hell's tortured souls. (342)

The *Kensington Society* described *Wormwood*'s affect in equally sensationalist tones:

—The reader is whirled about like a leaflet amidst lurid flashes and wild gusts of maddened invective, almost blinded by the effort he or she makes to realize the tempest which rages through the man possessed of the “liquid fire” (qtd. in *Wormwood* 379).

Corelli's language and depiction of characters serves to create a heightened experience in order to, in her words, “excite comment and set people *thinking*” (qtd. in *Wormwood* 372).⁶ The projection of lived experience that she presents is not necessarily realistic, but exaggerative or sensationalist. After all, is it realistic to think that *all* absinthe drinkers are destined to become degenerate shuffling beasts or that all women who read fashionable novels will be inclined to morbidity? Corelli would have her readers think so, and that is the important part.

By creating characters that represent types more so than individuals, Corelli utilizes a melodramatic trope and further emphasizes her social and political critique. Cvetkovich's analysis of Sensation novels examines types of characters such as the “beautiful but insane woman or the suffering but silent woman” in order to see how these

⁶ A letter from Marie Corelli to George Bentley 6 August 1890

types —provide a reassuring structure or explanation for [social] anxiety” (35).

Melodramas, one of the many genres of Sensational literature, rely on specific types of characters such as the hero and villain. These types provide a pre-fabricated structure for the dissemination of an ideological critique. The individual characteristics of a hero, for example, will thus be easily read as ideal characteristics because they come in the form of a heroic character. Corelli’s texts recurrently employ the common melodramatic structure, —in which either the hero and villain are easily identified and dramatically opposed or the suffering heroine is victimized and persecuted” (Cvetkovich 35). The larger social or political critique that can be made from character types is illustrated through the single example of Silvion Guidèl, the priest in *Wormwood*. As a priest, Silvion serves as a representation of the Catholic church, as well as an individual character. His eventual betrayal of Gaston contrasts sharply with his religious principles and his own vision of himself as a priest. Silvion’s doubts about his vocation reveal the complex relationship to God and contemporary life that a nineteenth-century priest must confront in everyday life:

[C]an you imagine, Beauvais, what it is to be a priest?—. . . to consecrate one’s entire body and soul to a vast Invisible that never speaks, that never answers, that gives no sign of either refusal or acquiescence to the most passionate prayers,—to cut all natural affections down at one blow, . . . to become a human tomb for one’s own buried soul. (129)

Silvion’s confliction between priesthood and life outside the Catholic church are thus presented as a serious predicament that could easily influence Silvion’s actions. Yet Silvion restrains himself when speaking with Gaston and comes to the conclusion that he

can be a priest even with his guilty conscience: “If I know myself to be a whited sepulchre, what then? There are many like me,—what should I do with a conscience?” (130). There are many moments when Silvion’s individual character is collapsed with of all priests. His situation loses its individuality—and thus its complexity—when the text repeatedly reiterates that most (or all) priests lack a conscience. It is in frequent moments such as this that Corelli’s texts deviate from Realism and instead employ a melodramatic structure.

However, Corelli complicates this basic structure in that there is rarely a villain. Even the presence of the devil in *The Sorrows of Satan* does not immediately signify the devil as villain. Lucio is a sympathetic character, and Geoffrey’s predicaments are all based on allowing society to influence and corrupt him. Sibyl’s victimization is not by any direct person, but contemporary fiction. Similarly, Gaston is victimized by the influences of absinthe and French artists. Corelli even emphasizes Gaston’s universal qualities in her preface: “The unhappy hero of the following *drame* is presented to the English readers, not as an example of what is exceptionally tragic and uncommon, but simply as a very ordinary type of a large and ever-increasing class” (61). Again, the individualism is suspended in favor of a broader critique. Gaston and Sibyl represent men and women fallen from the social ideal because of contemporary social and cultural influences. They are the victims of the modern age. This particular approach to characterization reveals that Corelli’s texts employ characterization techniques commonly used by lowbrow sensational novels.

Corelli’s treatment of characters resembles another lowbrow approach to characterization: the romance. In her introduction to *The Sorrows of Satan*, Julia Kuehn

borrowing Gillian Beer's work on the romance to claim that the romance world is distorted and "intensifies and exaggerates certain traits in human behavior" (qtd. in Kuehn xiii). Romance characters, Kuehn explains, take on a "symbolical quality" so that through these exaggerated characters the writer is able to explore the "radical impulses of human experience" (xiii). The romance is typically referred to as a particularly lowbrow Victorian genre. Kuehn firmly places *The Sorrows of Satan* in the romance genre, but in the reviews of *Ardath* (1889) she analyzes in "The Strategies of the Popular Novel" that offer an interesting look at how the romance was received in the Victorian era. Throughout her career, Kuehn claims, Corelli "was quickly sided with the low, popular kind of writing" (977). *The Daily Telegraph* considered *Ardath* "not, strictly speaking, a novel at all: it is a romance" (qtd. Kuehn 977). Kuehn's analysis of this comment illustrates the divide between the realist mode (not to be confused with French Realism or Naturalism) and the romance: "Thus the reviewer draws a distinction between the realist mode of the novel—the celebrated form of the time—and the imaginative nature of romance" (977). The reviews echoed the popular critical reception of romances, namely that they were barely worth the read.

Corelli treats romances in a much different light and in doing so her texts indicate that their idealistic representations are generally considered lowbrow. Geoffrey Tempest's book—written before he inherited wealth and met Lucio—is described as "a romance dealing with the noblest forms of life and highest ambitions;—I wrote it with the intention of elevating and purifying the thoughts of my readers" (25). When picking up Mavis Clare's newest romance, he makes the assumption that it will be "a mere piece of woman's trash":

If this Mavis Clare was indeed so “popular,” then her work must naturally be of the “penny dreadful” order, for I, like many another literary man . . . could not imagine [the public] capable of voluntarily selecting for itself any good work of literature without guidance from the critics. (125)

Of course, Geoffrey comes to the conclusion that he was wrong and that Mavis Clare had the “quality of Genius!” (126). *The Sorrows of Satan* illustrates the common view of literary critics that popular romances were trash. It also comments on a key feature of romance writing that Corelli employs throughout her texts, namely idealization. We have only to look back at the examples from *Wormwood* and *The Sorrows of Satan* to see that Corelli uses specific ideals as representations for what her characters cannot achieve due to social and cultural influences. Realism was interested more in the side of reality that was not typically discussed. Hence, the New Woman novels discussed feminist topics that stood in antithesis to traditional conceptions of femininity and marriage. Corelli’s texts discuss reality as she feels it *ought* to be. It isn’t a stretch to further conclude that her opinions were widely shared due to the immense popularity of her idealistic romances. The use of lowbrow tropes borrowed from Sensationalism and romance novels illustrates the lowbrow aspects of Corelli’s texts.

Resisting Decadence and the Lowbrow/Highbrow Interdependence

Corelli’s texts clearly borrow from devices within lowbrow genres such as sensationalism and romance. Recent scholarship, however, has made compelling cases for Corelli’s inclusion in high culture. Kirsten MacLeod finds *Wormwood* “ambivalent in its relationship to Decadence” (87). She and Annette Federico note that the novel

resembles decadence with its pale green cover, and serpent twisting through the letter *W*; it was —packaged as the very flower of decadence,” as Federico puts it (*Idol of Suburbia* 72). MacLeod seems hesitant to include the novel in a Decadent tradition, though she argues that —Corelli’s attempts at a Decadent stylization render her so-called critique of Decadence ambiguous.” She nods toward the narrative’s exploitation of —the stylistic extravagance and imagery associated with Decadence” as evidence (88). The imagery may be associated with Decadence due to the subject matter. Corelli makes no secret of the fact that her subject matter concerns the tortured and dazed absintheur. His rambles in absinthe dens and the lower sides of Paris, while certainly associated with the lurid subjects of French novels, are not meant render her moral ambiguous. It is clear from the text that the reader should not approve of the absintheur or his habits. The stylistic extravagance MacLeod mentions could easily be attributed to sensationalist language. However, the ambiguity MacLeod finds in the Decadent subject matter may be helpful in understanding the popularity of Corelli’s novels despite the Decadent absintheur.

MacLeod and Federico claim that the Decadent subject matter either render the moral ambiguous or produce a Decadent text, but neither argument sufficiently addresses *Wormwood*’s project as it is presented to the reader. As pointed out earlier in this paper, Federico’s study is interested in how Corelli participates in the high art movements of the late-nineteenth century. She argues that —*Wormwood* is completely dependent on decadent tropes” (73). One such trope she analyzes is the character of André Gessonex. He is portrayed as a stereotypical —debauchee” and his lifestyle as one of many French artists. I would argue, however, that Corelli’s moralizing mission subdues any such

claims that her subject matter or characters make the text a Decadent one. While Federico may find “contradictions and paradoxical treatments of Parisian decadence in *Wormwood*,” I would point out that her subject matter demands a representation of what Corelli terms “a true phase of the modern life of Paris” (*Idol* 75; *Wormwood* 63). Corelli even asks her readers and critics to “kindly refrain from setting down my hero’s opinions on men and things to *me* personally. . . . I have nothing whatever to do with the wretched ‘Gaston Beauvais’ beyond the portraiture of him in his own necessarily lurid colours” (62). I believe it would be misleading to even consider Corelli as a participant in Decadence because her subject is a Decadent one. Clearly, *Wormwood* is engaged in a critique of Decadence. Having said that, I would also point out that this does not necessarily stop the audience from *enjoying* the novel because of its Decadent subject. It may very well be that some readers approached the text from a voyeuristic standpoint and enjoyed the “lurid colours,” while also approving of the overall moral. In artistic movements that celebrated the distancing of art from morality—art for art’s sake—an obligatory moral would spoil the entire project. Since the moral is such a key part of the text, to call *Wormwood* a Decadent text or a participant in Decadence would be to misunderstand Decadence and Corelli’s text.

Federico attempts to make the similar argument that *The Sorrows of Satan* participates in Decadence, but again the *treatment* of the Decadent subject matter is not shown enough attention. Due to the reproduction of several stanzas of Swinburne’s, an effeminate Lucio, an “implicit homoeroticism” between Lucio and Geoffrey, a male narrator—“not uncommon for New Women and decadent female writers”—, and “a love of horror and all unusual things,” Federico argues that *The Sorrows of Satan* is definitely

in collusion with decadence” (78). We have already seen how Swinburne, the corrupter of souls, was treated by Corelli. Male narrators are not uncommon to many of Corelli’s other novels, and the unusual things (such as mysticism and dream sequences) could be attributed to any number of art movements. Federico does provide an interesting analysis of Geoffrey and Lucio’s relationship, along with Lucio’s effeminacy. However, it could be argued that their relationship is necessarily depicted as perverted. Geoffrey has been seduced by the devil, and the end of the novel celebrates his return to God and the dissolution of his relationship with Lucio. More importantly, I would again argue that scholars are elevating the importance of the subject matter over the treatment of that subject matter. In my earlier analysis I show that *The Sorrows of Satan* represents characters who have been corrupted by either reading material or wealth (combined, of course, with the devil). Swinburne’s verses are reproduced, but he is also called a corrupter of souls. The message outweighs the subject. Yet again, this does not discount a readership that might enjoy the reproduction of the corruptible verses.

While I believe fair observations have been made regarding the analysis of Corelli’s texts, I also believe they can be misleading and often gloss over the complex inclusion of the lowbrow and highbrow within those texts. To say that a text is in ‘collusion’ with decadence implies that the text belongs within the movement. Corelli’s didacticism and idealization of reality resist such a placement. However, her subject matter in the two discussed novels clearly exhibit ambiguities that have not been sufficiently explained. The fact that Corelli includes subjects that include high culture movements such as Decadence, French Realism or Naturalism, and New Woman fiction might not signify participation in those movements, but it’s clear that they have

prominent placements in her texts. There is a possibility that this subject matter operates in a similar way that Sensationalism and romance are functioning within these texts. Those elements are being used to serve the specific text's social moral. We do not seem to question the role those elements play in Corelli's popularity, primarily because they are already assumed to be associated with popular, though lowbrow, genres. I would like to suggest that Corelli's use of high culture (or highbrow) subjects could also be contributing to her popularity simply by their presence. The subjects may have offended the majority of readers when packaged in a text that celebrated those subjects, but perhaps Corelli's attitude towards them aided in making those subjects bearable in her own work. As MacLeod suggests of *Wormwood*, "Corelli gives us the lifestyle of the Decadent as imagined by a prurient middle-class readership" (87). Her writings may well have satisfied middle-class Victorian curiosity concerning the very subjects they loudly opposed. *The Sorrows of Satan* and *Wormwood* borrow from lowbrow techniques and highbrow subjects to produce extremely popular Victorian texts.

Which Brow to Choose? The Problem of Making a Distinction

Categories and classifications are not simply inevitable but also useful as long as they sharpen our vision and free us to rethink and redefine them.

Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*

Since Corelli's texts borrow from Victorian low and high culture, her fiction would seem to fall into that ambiguous space termed middlebrow. Judging from the fact that the terms lowbrow and highbrow derive from Victorian anthropological distinctions, I believe it fair to appropriate them for late-nineteenth century culture. The middlebrow,

however, presents its own difficulties. Middlebrow fiction is often defined against highbrow and lowbrow literature. In this process, middlebrow becomes subordinated as anything that resists placement into high or low. Rosa Bracco's study of middlebrow fiction from 1919-1939 relies on such a treatment of the term. For Bracco, middlebrow fiction "stood in the vast space between lowbrow fiction, designed merely to entertain, and highbrow works, increasingly alienated from a common reference of values" (12). The definition that Nicola Humble employs for middlebrow fiction from the 1920s-1950s also establishes a construct significantly "dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights" (12). Studies such as these demonstrate a desire to place texts within a continuum, rather than perpetuating a high/low binary. It further demonstrates the "secret interdependence" between low and high culture that Andreas Huyssen suggested. The association of commercialization with middlebrow fiction further encourages hybridity. Huyssen points out that "commodification itself leads to class-crossings, producing hybrid forms" (18). Increased access to and a proliferation of cheaper literature in the Victorian era created greater opportunities for novels to experiment with different genres and subjects that were not typically represented through Mudie's Circulating Library. But *how* we should employ this ambiguous hybrid term is not quite clear.

Whether the term middlebrow should be used as a genre, historical phenomenon, ideology, or in-between space is not necessarily agreed upon by all scholars. For Janice Radway, middlebrow culture is both a "material and an ideological form" (367). She argues against Joan Rubin's connection of middlebrow culture to the "older, genteel" nineteenth-century culture, and instead sees middlebrow as an "important modernist

ideological response” (367). Radway’s vision of middlebrow is historically situated and, indeed, many scholars’ work on the middlebrow is concerned with historicity. Yet each scholar is working in slightly different historical moments. Teresa Mangum gestures towards “the difficulty of mapping present-day categories onto the past as well as the danger of uncritically importing terms and categories from the past without attending to their etymology,” using Susan Bernstein’s anthropological research as rationale for applying middlebrow to Sarah Grand’s nineteenth-century work (17). The historical moments that each scholar finds themselves researching inevitably changes their discussion of middlebrow fiction. Nicola Humble’s argument calls for what seems a more flexible understanding of both middlebrow and highbrow culture. She suggests that these be “understood not as formal or generic categories, but as cultural constructs” (28). Her examples for this decision illustrate that the two brows can not always be distinguished from one another on a purely formal or thematic basis. Popular novels can be just as experimental in form as avant-garde works, and high modernism can share similar themes found in a middlebrow novel (28). Humble’s discussion of the middlebrow as a cultural construct is dependent on the historical emergence of Modernism and the middlebrow as a response, echoing Radway’s vision of the middlebrow. The application of middlebrow to so many different time periods illustrates the need for a hybrid term that both describes a specific historical moment and allows for a category that acknowledges what studies of the highbrow and lowbrow have not.

To appropriate this twentieth-century term to the late-nineteenth century makes a certain amount of sense if we consider the commercial success, new audience, hybridity, and identity formation that is associated with the middlebrow. The commercialization and

democratization of late-Victorian literature parallel discussions of twentieth-century middlebrow fiction. Marie Corelli's popular fiction illustrates the hybridity of certain Victorian novels, which borrow from lowbrow and highbrow fiction in a manner similar to that of Humble's twentieth-century texts. The middlebrow project, by defining itself against high and low art, is very much concerned with identity. It creates its identity by borrowing and resisting low and high culture. It also promotes specific identities, such as the national identity that Ina Habermann discusses or the creation of a properly gendered national identity which Corelli champions. In a surly review of Corelli, J. M. Stuart-Young makes an important point regarding her influence:

I regret that Miss Corelli's influence is a baleful one. We must not ignore the influence of popular books upon the masses. It is from the production of that section of literary workers which devotes itself to the delineations of emotion that the crowd derives its ideals of morality and its conceptions of beauty. (qtd. in *Sorrows* 390-1)

Though Stuart-Young echoes the common sentiment that popular literature negatively influences readers, his second sentence shows how Corelli's texts contribute to the formation of identity. From her works the public gleans moral ideals and perceptions of beauty. Whatever her faults may be, Stuart-Young cannot deny that Corelli's social and cultural engagement helps to form the society around him. Her texts are thus deeply involved in the negotiation of collective identity. Humble discusses a similar phenomenon concerning the middlebrow's attention to the middle class —whose members began to question their own identity, the role of their class and its future in the nation” (37). There is, of course, a problematic nature to appropriating terms that are historically

situated, such as the middle class Humble discusses. The advent of World War I, the usual designation for the beginning of middlebrow fiction, presents a far different cultural and social landscape than the 1890s. The affiliation of middlebrow with the Book-of-the-Month Club has no easy correlation to the late-nineteenth century. However, the reason for applying middlebrow to the Victorian era speaks to the lack of a place in Victorian studies for those works that fall into the ambiguous space between low and high culture.

With the dismantling of the Victorian canon, scholarship has naturally focused on works that oppose or offer a different approach than the typical canonical works, perhaps to the detriment of texts that offer us a view of the dominant Victorian ideologies. This recent focus led to the discovery of such late-nineteenth century movements as Decadence, Aestheticism, and the New Woman novel. The subversive qualities of these movements offer exciting opportunities for scholars to examine Victorian counterculture. The common stereotype of the prudish Victorian falls away when we examine such texts and the new ideologies that sprang up in the late-nineteenth century. It is important to continue the study of these movements, if only because they represent an important cultural discussion of the late-Victorian era. It has been assumed that by (re)discovering these texts Victorian scholarship has been recovering what was lost in the exclusive focus of the Victorian canon. This is certainly true, but the current trend to discuss these subversive texts also harms the study of popular Victorian authors. There has been increasing interest in the study of popular texts, but, as I discussed earlier, the common approach tends to impose high art categories upon those popular texts. The emphasis on Victorian counterculture has led to the practice of finding how popular fiction participates in those movements. This becomes problematic when we are faced with an author such as

Marie Corelli. Her texts do not easily fit within a strictly lowbrow or highbrow classification. She borrows from both to serve a moral purpose that neither category necessarily values. Scholarship on Victorian popular fiction is rightly concerned with resisting the negative value judgments that were often associated with those texts. To say that a certain popular text participates in a high art movement is a compliment in Victorian studies. However good the intentions may be, we still need to realize that justice needs to be done to the popular text itself. We must attend to popular fiction on its own terms, whether it turns out that it is aligning itself with the highbrow, or whether it is integrating a strange amalgam of low and highbrow to create something entirely different.

Currently, Victorian studies uses the term popular fiction, which tells us nothing except that a large audience read the particular work. Implicit within the definition lies all of the negative connotations that Victorian and contemporary critics alike have attributed to mass culture. Continuing to use the category of popular fiction in such a way harms our understanding of these texts and Victorian highbrow movements. Texts such as Corelli's offer us a closer look at the dominant or conventional mode of thinking in the late-nineteenth century. How can we legitimately study those oppositional highbrow movements when we don't pay attention to what they are reacting *against*? I would argue that we miss not only the complexities of that mass of texts we term popular, but we also miss the complexities of those oppositional movements we find so much interest in. Studying the treatment of highbrow subjects in popular novels such as *Wormwood* and *The Sorrows of Satan* allows us to examine how the majority of Victorians felt about those subjects. Knowing how they felt and reacted will in turn give us greater insight into

the projects of highbrow writers. We can only do this by attending to popular fiction without trying to claim its legitimacy by searching for its engagement in highbrow movements.

I offer the middlebrow, not necessarily as a term we must appropriate, but as a possibility for Victorian studies. Characteristics of twentieth-century middlebrow may very well resonate with late-Victorian fiction, but I hesitate to wholeheartedly appropriate a term so historically situated. I believe the idea of the middlebrow, however, is important to Victorian studies. As a term that ambiguously covers the range of texts that resist easy placement into highbrow or lowbrow categories, middlebrow offers twentieth-century scholarship a place outside of high or low art. The popular fiction category that Victorian studies uses in the absence of any middlebrow term ignores the nuanced complexity of novels such as Marie Corelli's. The project of a popular shilling shocker is quite different from a popular Corelli novel. To conflate the two is to misunderstand the complexities of late-Victorian culture. Marie Corelli's novels offer Victorian studies challenging ambiguities that must be teased out in order to better understand the nuances of popular fiction and the Victorian reading public. We may refrain from calling her texts middlebrow, but a closer look at how such a text resists easy categorization is necessary in order to rethink and redefine our pre-existing categories.

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