

# The “Thingness” of the American Middlebrow: *The Great Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in Conversation

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The one-hundred-year anniversary of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* looms in the not-at-all-distant future. Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* has enjoyed decades of success in classrooms, theaters, and screens in the United States and abroad. The symbolism of the green light has shined for high school students through dozens if not hundreds of AP Literature exams, and its many editions lurk on the bookshelves of teachers, students, and general readers alike. The novel has been adapted for the screen six times since 1926, with heartthrob Leonardo di Caprio delivering the most recent portrayal of Jay Gatsby. Yet, as the centennial of *Gatsby* draws nearer, so too does the anniversary of less ubiquitous, but still highly influential text. The title of the Netflix biodrama *Blonde* (dir. Andrew Dominik, 2022) alludes to the 1954 film adaptation of Anita Loos’s bestselling novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), a novel that far outsold *Gatsby* in the 1920s, but is less well-known today. 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.

Although *Gatsby* and *Blondes* are mentioned together in scholarship about Loos’s work and in passing in discussions of *Gatsby*’s commercial production, the two have not often been closely analyzed in tandem. The serialized publication of *Blondes* in a popular middlebrow women’s magazine secured immediate but transient commercial success, while *Gatsby*’s initial popular and critical failure was redeemed by its publication as an Armed Services Edition during WWII, and its subsequent inclusion in curricula and standardized tests secured its legacy as a Great American Novel. The pairing is important not only because of the two novels’ disparate legacies, but also because studying the two together helps identify particular values absorbed or condemned by American Dream mythology. In contrast to *Gatsby*, who is beloved because he tried and failed, and whose tragic end-

ing resonates with the sentiment that the Dream is elusive and even dangerous, Lorelei is an example of a “bad” woman succeeding, having risen from anonymity in Arkansas to East Coast affluence with the help of older, wealthier men’s cash. In *Gatsby*, women like Lorelei face tragic ends; in *Blondes*, “bad” women come out on top. The national myth that anyone can make anything of themselves with enough “hard work” and the right “things”—informed in this study by Bill Brown’s conceptualization of “thingness” in his cultural study *A Sense of Things* (2003)—is centered, troubled, and perpetuated by these novels and reinforced by their histories as print culture objects, as American “things” themselves.

My work here in pairing *Blondes* and *Gatsby* demonstrates the interconnectedness of middlebrow literature to other middlebrow cultural institutions through the novels’ content, their rhetorical engagements with other middlebrow media, and their histories as print objects. The novels’ engagements with middlebrow magazine culture demonstrate that the middlebrow can and should be thought of as a site wherein consumerism and the constraints of a capitalist system are both criticized and engaged—that is, in a US context, the middlebrow utilizes mass cultural and popular modes to grapple with the fundamentally contradictory concept of an American Dream as achievable and evidenced by an accumulation of “things.”

## **Historicizing and “Defining” Middlebrow**

Scholars frequently disagree about what, exactly, constitutes middlebrow literature. The middlebrow as an identifiable class of objects and styles first emerged in Europe, and then in the United States, in the 1920s. Printing innovations in this period 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 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. Although the term *middlebrow* did not appear in print until 1927, the blueprint of middlebrow literature was already being sketched out in precisely the same period in which literary modernism took up considerable academic space. Nicola Humble claims that when works by modernists like James Joyce and Virginia 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). Rather than a distinct category of literature with a clearly marked date of emergence, what is

understood as “middlebrow literature” is in fact an extension of the more familiar literary form of the nineteenth century domestic novel, negatively defined by the emergence of the avant-garde modernist novel. These new literary movements cast novels with more conventional themes in a new and less flattering light. Both Woolf and Q.D. Leavis, for example, suggest that middlebrow literature is less intellectually stimulating—it is, after all, the “agreeable sensation of having improved themselves” but “without [the] fatigue” of a comparatively difficult text which so bothers Leavis (qtd Hammill 6)—and thus less worthy of esteem, despite Woolf’s own contradictory engagement with middlebrow institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Whether considered an aesthetic phenomenon or an economic product, the middlebrow’s associations with “feminine” literary elements and, as Faye Hammill notes, a “preoccupation with style, taste, imitation, and social performance,” has resulted in the harsh criticisms directed at middlebrow media by contemporary and current critics alike (Hammill 5). Reparative readings of the middlebrow have therefore often taken shape in feminist scholarship. A feminist analysis of the middlebrow is of course useful in that, as Janice Radway posits, 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 position,” but it is imperative to also engage its other historically, critically, and economically significant connections (Radway 872). While a few critical engagements, like Kate MacDonald’s *The Masculine Middlebrow* (2011), have troubled the conception of the middlebrow as highly feminized in her reading of men’s literary habits between 1880-1950, most scholarship about the masculine middlebrow is limited to Britain and the Commonwealth, in no small part due to the fact that American and British middlebrow cultures are connected but molded by entirely distinct sociohistorical and economic conditions.

In his analysis of the political economy of modernism, Schliefer demonstrates that the topic of middlebrow literature is not what makes it middlebrow. He explains that the class warfare of the early twentieth century produced “a literature of ‘manners,’” for example, “‘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

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1. Woolf published four short stories (“In the Looking Glass,” “The Shooting Party,” “The Duchess and the Jeweler,” and “Lappin and Lapinova”) in *Harper’s Bazaar* between 1930 and 1939. Her engagement with the middlebrow magazine did not seem to impact her reputation as a highbrow intellectual, but was in fact reflective of the relationship between high modernism and middlebrow culture. For more on Woolf’s engagement with *Harper’s Bazaar*, see Annalisa Federici, “The Ethics of Writing at High Rates for Fashion Papers: Virginia Woolf’s Short Stories for Harper’s Bazaar,” (2022).

class, attempted an explanation of the ‘secrets of power’ in social and personal life” (Schleifer 213). Both “a literature of manners” and “a literature of adventure” are considered modernist themes here—and yet, as Humble and Hammill note, a focus on domestic concerns and the entertainment value of adventure have also negatively characterized middlebrow literature. Since the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, some scholars have promoted the category “middlebrow modernism” to reconcile these tensions, but this too has proven to be a tricky task. As literary scholar Daniel Tracy argues in his analysis of Loos’s vernacular humor, the particular rhetorical choices of middlebrow works like *Blondes* (such as “baby talk,” irony, and experimentation, among others) resist such reductive scholarly categorization (Tracy 139). Not only does this amalgamation of modernism and the middlebrow often become, as Tracy suggests, “modernism askew,” but subsuming the middlebrow under the broader category of modernism also alienates middlebrow literatures from the middlebrow aesthetic (Tracy 139). If topic, genre, and narrative style are not the defining aspects of middlebrow literature, it is necessary to shift the scope of analysis to consider the economic conditions shaping the era in which the American middlebrow emerged.

The aspiration of the middlebrow is high culture and all its trappings—especially those that convey wealth, prestige, acceptance, and notoriety. The role of “things” or material goods is especially significant in the US context because, as John Guillory, Harold Bloom, and others<sup>2</sup> have argued, “there is no official ‘high culture’ in the United States” (Guillory 85). Rather, the accumulation and display of “things” actually usurp high culture as the aspirational goal. Russell Lynes notes that middlebrow iconography promotes a vision of the American Dream through a delicate balance of emotional and material elements, though with a firm emphasis on particular consumer goods. This vision is marked by

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2. I refer namely to Harold Bloom here, whose book, *The Western Canon*, John Guillory reviews. Although Guillory takes issue with Bloom’s overall argument, its underlying anxiety is one with which Guillory sympathizes. One of the arguments of Bloom’s book is that there is no true “high culture” in the United States, and thus the American love of literature is pure and uncontaminated by aspiration to wealth or elitism. According to Bloom, however, the literature professoriate in the United States has ruined this pure love of literature by moving away from true literary study and criticism to “cultural studies,” which is more akin to social science than to literature.

happy little women, happy little children ... a world pictured without tragedy, a world of new two-door sedans and Bendix washers and reproductions of hunting prints over the living-room mantel... But it is a world of ambition as well, the constant striving for a better way of life—better furniture, bigger refrigerators, more books in the bookcase, more evenings at the movies. To the advertisers this is Americanism. (156)

For Lynes, like Woolf, the middlebrow is defined most notably by consumer culture and an accumulation of “things” with culturally constructed emotional and aesthetic value. My discussion of the middlebrow therefore necessarily situates the concept firmly in an understanding of “things” or material objects as essential in the construction of identity in a US context. Brown argues that the nineteenth century was a time when “the invention, production, distribution, and consumption of things rather suddenly came to define a national culture,” and his analysis acutely questions how this culture of consumption forever changed American culture, evidenced by the prominence of “things” in American literature (Brown 4). Brown discusses not only material, commercial objects, but also the power and meaning of “things” of literature, particularly the formal and mechanical strategies such as “rhetorical grammars” and “logic reference” employed by writers in order to make things “real” in literature (Brown 16-17). In many ways, the focus of Brown’s text suggests that American identity is in large part constituted by both our accumulation and our *display* of things. He argues, in fact, that we are not only motivated but also controlled by this collection of objects able to “captivat[e] humans with the mesmeric power of their aesthetic value” (Brown 33).

*Gatsby* and *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. These texts foreground an aesthetic investment in and facilitate an examination of “the role of objects in American lives...and the role of humans in the life of American objects” (Brown 14). Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby and Loos’s Lorelei Lee literally construct new identities through their consumption and accumulation of objects. *Gatsby* and *Blondes* thus simultaneously help to teach us about and critique this middlebrow aesthetic ideology by staging their protagonists’ relationship with “things.”

Because the middlebrow is in part an act of imitation and is present in a variety of forms in society, its relationship to genre and medium is important. Susan Hegemen suggests that in the early twentieth century, the accumulation of books became for the American middle class as much a sign of status—perhaps more—than one’s knowledge of the information inside them (Hegemen 531). Thus, in the early twentieth century there begin to occur protagonists like Lorelei, who instructs her maid to read and summarize books for her so that she can appear in

cocktail party conversation to have read them,<sup>3</sup> and Gatsby, whose library full of “absolutely real” books with uncut pages astounds his owl-eyed guest.<sup>4</sup> Gatsby’s famously unread books demonstrate the middlebrow character of the protagonist 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 a key function. As Humble notes, the bookshelf of the middlebrow hero and heroine generally “tells us a great deal about the... reader the middlebrow novel has in mind” (Humble 8). The books which fill the libraries of both Lorelei and Gatsby do not even need to be named, let alone read—they serve only to demonstrate that both protagonists are surrounded by cultural products which are slowly but surely gaining commercial value. In this sense, middlebrow media such as the novel, magazine, and advertisement are both narrative *and* object inasmuch as they are used for display in the fabrication of identity for these characters. As in Brown’s analysis of Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*, for Lorelei and Gatsby “objects always mediate identity, and always fail to” (49). The print culture objects with which Lorelei and Gatsby engage simultaneously inform our understandings of the protagonists and elude signification entirely. These novels also explore how a middlebrow aesthetic is defined by art objects that are persuasively, accessibly about (and illustrated by) products of culture that are to be collected and displayed. It is not necessary for Gatsby or Lorelei to read the books, only to demonstrate that they *have* them.

In these novels, a middlebrow ethos of inessential consumption manifests 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 also “in the lives of extraordinary people, who seem to fulfill lower-middle-class desire, although most significantly by means of ‘*crimes of mobility*’” (Schleifer 213, emphasis mine). Social mobility is a value by which the U.S. has charac-

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3. Lorelei tells us: “I decided not to read the book by Mr. Cellini. I mean it was quite amusing [sic] in spots because it was really quite riskay [sic] 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 amusing [sic] 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).

4. 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 not “cut[ting] the pages” (46). Although the books are not cardboard fakes, the fact that Gatsby “didn’t cut the pages” proves he never read them (46).

terized itself for centuries, and yet it is also strictly (though inconsistently) regulated by a nebulous social and economic system which in practice limits such mobility. The middlebrow renders ambiguous the distinction between the acquisition of “things” and social (climbing) connection—as Schleifer notes, those who engage in this behavior “dispense with community and loyalty and progress through betrayal and swindle” (213). Lorelei’s satirical diary and Nick’s tragic character-narration convey each novel’s ironic relationship to the sincere middlebrow aesthetic. The American Dream mythos of unobstructed social mobility through the accumulation and display of “things” is contradicted by the very “things” of middlebrow culture that need to be acquired in the process of social climbing. As the novels demonstrate, the process of social climbing via consumption exhibits instead that class divisions are real and that possessing the “right things” is not sufficient to traverse them. Each of the middlebrow characters I analyze here commit such “crimes of mobility,” both through their social betrayals (imitation or fabrication of identity, illicit affairs) and through their aspirational consumerism.

### **The “Thingness” of the Middlebrow**

Both *Gatsby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* relied on readers’ understanding of pop culture products of the day, and *Gatsby* and Lorelei’s constructed personas are reinforced by the protagonists’ engagements with a variety of forms of middlebrow culture, most notably the middlebrow magazine and gossip column. *Blondes*’s engagement with middlebrow print culture is literal as well as narrative: in her protagonist, 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. Lorelei’s careful attention to manners, etiquette, and fashion—though comical—highlight both the ephemeral quality of the new Jazz Age femininity and the necessity of securing it through one’s appearance. Lorelei’s narrative “product placement,” coupled with actual advertisements for these same products adds to the dialectic between middlebrow novel, consumer, and print culture. Like Hammill, Churchwell finds that the narrative “both replicated and mocked the cultural politics of the magazine in which it appeared,” and as a result, “uneasiness about commercialism and publicity pervades the history of *Blondes* from inception to reception” (Churchwell 136). The 1924-1925 volumes of *Harper’s Bazar* followed a predictable pattern of advertisements: the first page is a full spread ad 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 (includ-

ing 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 table of contents, which appears around page 58 with some regularity. The next 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, *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. Sarah Churchwell notes that in reading *Blondes* excerpts within *Harper’s Bazar*, “one finds satire and its target literally side by side, as...Lorelei [buys] what the reader of *Harper’s* is told to fantasize about” (Churchwell 143). The reader is instructed, for example, “in what to wear on shipboard sailing for Europe,” and within the same magazine, “Lorelei sets sail” (Churchwell 143). Lorelei’s privileging of the aesthetic value of commercial objects over history and “culture” demonstrates what Brown considers the “misuse value” of objects, and effectively creates within the lines of her story (embedded in the pages of a fashion magazine) a “world of legible artifact” (Brown 104). Lorelei’s interest in the “historical sights” of Paris is misplaced when she explains to her imagined reader that “if you turn your back on a monument they have in the middle and look up, you can see none other than Coty’s sign...where Mr. Coty makes all the perfume” (*Blondes* 52-53). Lorelei’s desires to see the historical sights of Paris and to be “educated” are all the funnier because she turns away from a true “historical” *site* to look at a *sign*—a billboard advertisement—for the same perfume advertised within the pages of the very magazine in which her own story appears.

That Lorelei stays in the Ritz in New York, the Ritz in Paris, and the Ritz in Budapest is understandable for readers of *Harper's Bazar*, who see advertisements for the Ritz in various locations throughout the world, promising an "exotic" but comfortable experience no matter where they go. *Blondes* capitalizes on the figure of the provincial American abroad, who longed for the excitement and adventure of meeting other Americans in Europe and the comfort of staying in familiar hotels. Lorelei appreciates London for this same reason: "you would really think it was New York because I always think that the most delightful thing about traveling is to always be running into Americans and to always feel at home" (*Blondes* 33). The advertisements and the fiction work in tandem to present a picture of elegance, fashion, and grace, which the reader could attain by purchasing the products and visiting the places promoted by the magazine. The ideal American woman should, according to the pages of *Bazar*, be able to maintain her slender, youthful appearance, be driven around in (or possibly even *drive!*) a luxury vehicle, and, as an April 1925 advertisement for the serial instructs, she "read [Anita Loos] (in the May issue of *Harper's Bazar*) and quote [her story] at the next dinner party" (*Bazar* 155). A devoted reader will gain the ultimate art of entertainment, the magazine suggests, by reading and referring to *Harper's Bazar*.

The situatedness of *Blondes* within the pages of a fashion and lifestyle magazine enriches our understanding of its protagonist by foregrounding the significance of aesthetic objects in Lorelei's constructed identity. However, most readers today will not encounter the narrative framed by 1920s advertisements, but rather as a novel. While the context and content of *Harper's Bazar* certainly underscores the middlebrow elements of the novel, its medium of initial publication is not its only site of engagement with middlebrow media. The premise of *Blondes* is not unique. Theodore Dreiser's realist novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), for example, depicts a similarly limited set of options for impoverished women looking for material wealth and excitement; as Lisa Mendelman notes in her analysis of the text as sentimental satire, Lorelei adheres to the predictable pattern of other sentimental heroines (albeit constructed with a great deal more irony) in her pursuit and achievement of economic security through marriage.<sup>5</sup> The rhetorical strategy of the novel—epistolary narration from the perspective of Lorelei, prone to malapropism and misunderstanding—restructures a familiar story by centering on what appears to be a comically oblivious protagonist and foregrounding her engagement with middlebrow culture in her construction of self. Lorelei's evolu-

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5. For more on *Blondes* as sentimental novel, see Lisa Mendelman, *Modern Sentimentalism: Affect, Irony, and Female Authorship in Interwar America* (2019), Chapter 2.

tion from Arkansan simpleton to sophisticated siren is achieved through her accumulation (and appropriate display) of things, primarily acquired through men who are interested in “educating” her. While the parameters of this education are dubious, Lorelei chooses to engage their motives in ways that benefit her own interest in money and material goods (particularly diamonds).

The implication that Lorelei’s professional status and means of social mobility are of a vaguely sexual nature underscores one of the crucial anxieties of middlebrow culture, and demonstrates the conflation of both consumption and production with sexual promiscuity in this period. 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. Lorelei represents anxieties of prostitution associated with women in the workforce as a “professional lady,” a (self-professed) “authoress,” and as an avid consumer of commercial goods. Although *Blondes* ends in a marriage (what “good” women do), Lorelei secures the match by deceiving everyone around her in a series of crimes of mobility. While the moral implications of Lorelei’s occupation are purposefully ambiguous in the novel, the consequences of Myrtle’s social position are more explicit. Whereas in *Blondes*, “bad” women like Lorelei come out on top, Myrtle’s tragic circumstances in *Gatsby* demonstrate the occupational hazards of being a “kept woman.”

Myrtle’s association with middle- and lowbrow literatures situates her as the worst kind of woman from the perspective of 1920s sensibility—she is the perfect blend of hypersexuality and mindless consumerism. Where fashion and lifestyle magazines like *Harper’s Bazar* promoted examples of aspirational consumerism, social norms, and manners, other middlebrow media like gossip and scandal magazines and hard-boiled mysteries maintained these middlebrow norms by way of negative example. Myrtle, in her penchant for advertisement and gossip magazines, as well as her giddy compulsion to shop with Tom’s money, appears almost as a negative iteration of Lorelei, unable to escape anonymity and accumulating the *wrong* objects. At the train station on their way into the city, Myrtle’s first inclination is to pick up “a copy of Town Tattle and a moving-picture magazine” (*Gatsby* 27); in her apartment, Nick notices “[s]everal old copies of Town Tattle... and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway” (*Gatsby* 29). Myrtle tells Nick that when she first met Tom, she could not help but stare at him because of his “dress suit and patent leather shoes”; whenever he caught her staring, however, she “pretend[ed] to be looking at the advertisement over his head” (*Gatsby* 36). Like Lorelei, Myrtle is obsessed with consumer goods as markers of social status. Myrtle’s to-do list reads much like an

entry in Lorelei's diary: "I've got to get another [dress] tomorrow. I'm going to make a list of all the things I've got to get. A massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother's grave that'll last all summer. I got to write down a list so I won't forget all the things I got to do" (*Gatsby* 36). Where Lorelei works *with* the advertisements in *Harper's Bazar*, however, Myrtle is entrapped in the violent gossip of magazine culture. While for Lorelei, material goods afford her some measure of social freedom, Myrtle's is subsumed in her enchantment with the aesthetic value of objects.

Her consumption of gossip magazines like *Town Tattle* while also engaging in the behavior often reported in these magazines (such as picking up the papers and buying a dog in Tom's company) portrays her as both shallow and witless. The objects she accumulates, including the gossip and film magazines, underscore her crimes of mobility (via usurping Daisy's place as the object of Tom's attention and affection) and mark her as aspiring to but having always already failed to achieve the economic security and social mobility she desires. Myrtle is thus the kind of woman that must be "watched," as evidenced by the watchful eyes of T.J. Eckleburg. Hegemen suggests that allusions to the New York-based gossip magazine *Town Topics*—on which "Town Tattle" is modeled—reveal that Fitzgerald understood them as "a tool for blackmail and the destruction of lives" (Hamilton 43). Myrtle's behavior—and Tom's lack of discretion—appear even more reckless given Tom's history in the press. 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, emphasis mine). Myrtle's eventual death thus transforms her from the consumer of vapid gossip to its subject.

By contrast, Daisy Buchanan 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 of the men in *Blondes*, rich men like Tom, and "pretenders" like *Gatsby*) want to *be with* her, both because of her own status and the status she bestows on her partner. Although she is a significant subject within the narrative, Daisy functions figuratively as an object—above all, an object of desire. The novel acutely demonstrates the ambiguity of the middlebrow aesthetic (which often blurs the already fine line between autonomous character and objectified, consumable "thing") in Daisy's dual status as a character with agency and also as *something* to be imitated or acquired. Daisy, like other commodified "things," 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 highly dependent on the newspaper culture to which Myrtle’s attention is constantly turned. While Myrtle aspires to emulate the image of the ideal woman presented on the pages of newspapers and magazines, Daisy is the image emulated, and without this print culture, she loses some of her significance. Nick-as-narrator tells us that Gatsby had “read a Chicago paper for years just on the chance of catching a glimpse of Daisy’s name” (79). Gatsby’s optimistic voyeurism inversely parallels Daisy’s earlier unfortunate realization of Tom’s infidelity, and echoes both Myrtle’s consumerist middlebrow aspiration and her voyeuristic consumption.

The novel culminates in middlebrow genre-plus-medium when Gatsby’s father comes to town for the funeral at the end of the novel and shows Nick one of Gatsby’s old books, wherein the building blocks of his constructed persona are neatly laid out. Gatsby’s “SCHEDULE” and “GENERAL RESOLVES,” scribbled on the back page, demonstrate his middlebrow aspirations

Rise from bed.....6:00 A.M.  
 Dumbbell and exercise training.....6.15-6.30 “  
 Study electricity, etc.....7.15-8.15 “  
 Work.....8.30-4.30 P.M.  
 Baseball and sports.....4.30-5.00 “  
 Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it.....5.00-6.00 “  
 Study needed inventions.....7.00-9.00 “  
 GENERAL RESOLVES  
 ... Read one improving book or magazine per week.

(*Gatsby* 173, italics mine)

Gatsby remains, in the end, the sum of his material things, which include such middlebrow affectations as the library full of uncut books—purely decorative, with no attempt made to explore beyond the cover. It is clear by Gatsby’s youthful annotations that he consciously sought improvement in the very media we have been discussing—the “improving book[s] and magazines” that were so essential to those with upper-middle-class and even upper-class aspirations. Gatsby’s rudimentary personal schedule—including time during which to develop and practice his persona—demonstrates the performativity inherent to the aesthetic of the American middlebrow and its accompanying American Dream mythology. Such dramatic social mobility, it seems, necessitates the development of an imitative persona; but because this imitation is always aspira-

tional (that is, always aspired to by an outsider), it is always an imitation of something not quite real. *Gatsby* appears to, as the adage goes, “pull himself up by the bootstraps” and achieve economic wealth, social acclaim, and, most importantly, all of the trappings of personal and material success; yet, as we see by the end of the novel, these symbols are ephemeral. Although *Gatsby* is financially successful, his enterprises are dubious; although he is popular, no one attends his funeral; and although he has silk shirts and rows of full bookshelves, he still does not fit into the East Egg society he so desires.

Lorelei, too, is valued on the sum of her material objects in the end. Though she is successful (especially compared to *Gatsby*) her achievement is relegated to the milieu of the film set—a detail which further characterizes the social mobility of the American Dream as unattainable and serves as a critique of the consumerist obsession of the novel’s protagonist by foregrounding its inherent artificiality. Although *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* approaches its criticism of consumer culture through satire, the protagonist is still a victim of the exploitative capitalist system. Loos notes that, when translated for Soviet readership, the novel was “stripped... of all its fun and the plot which they uncovered was dire” (“The Biography of a Book,” *Blondes* xxxix). Where the “fun” of the novel is lost in translation, what is left is anything but comical:

[The plot] concerns early rape of its idiot heroine, an attempt by her to commit murder (only unsuccessful because she is clumsy with a gun), the heroine’s being cast adrift in the gangster-infested New York of Prohibition days, her relentless pursuit by predatory males (the foremost of whom constantly tries to pay her off at bargain rates) her renunciation of the only man who ever stirred her inner soul of a woman, her nauseous connection with a male who is repulsive to her physically, mentally and emotionally and her final engulfment in the grim monotony of suburban Philadelphia. (“The Biography of a Book,” *Blondes* xxxix)

*Gatsby* and *Blondes* in conversation demonstrate the permeation of consumerism into everyday lived experience in the United States as well as the inextricability of the middlebrow from understandings of that consumerism. In analyzing how these two texts use an aesthetic of the middlebrow to engage with and critique consumerist culture, it becomes clear that the middlebrow should be understood as more than a generic convention and should be treated as more than, as Rubin points out, a debate over an economic product or aesthetic phenomenon. The middlebrow should rather be understood as both at once: an aestheticization of an economic product.

Gatsby's failure to acquire Daisy, the ultimate "thing" he desires, in particular reflects the rootedness of the American middlebrow aesthetic in what Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer term the "culture industry"—a system which "endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises" and in fact mandates that "its consumers shall at no price be given what they desire" (111, 112). Analysis of the novels' engagements with the gossip culture of the 1920s reveals that the pursuit of the myth of social mobility through the acquisition of "things" is one which is not simply unattainable, but in fact requires criminal activity to *attempt* to achieve. Stripped of the novel's humorous rhetorical devices, Lorelei's \$7000 diamond tiara heist is no petty theft, and her ditsy blonde persona is perilously dependent 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 Meyer Wolfsheim, who is rumored to collect teeth for collateral. Like Lorelei, Gatsby's achievements are possible only by social and civil crimes of mobility. Gatsby had been, like most middlebrow heroes and heroines, "overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves," and longs for the objects that represent it: "the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (Fitzgerald 150). It is this overwhelming awareness that continues to set Gatsby apart and marks his otherness.

## Conclusion

Reading these novels in conversation facilitates a thorough discussion of the complex dimensions of the American middlebrow which have been largely overlooked. Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* demonstrate the interconnectedness of middlebrow literature to other middlebrow cultural institutions, both as print culture objects (material things themselves) that engage other print culture objects, like the magazine and dime store gangster novel, and as stories about the American obsession with the accumulation and display of *things*. While the novels attempt to distinguish themselves from the middlebrow commodification of books as accessories through tragic (*Gatsby*) and comic (*Blondes*) irony, the inclusion of middlebrow books within the narratives as well as the print circulation of *Gatsby* and *Blondes* as middle-class icons are at odds with their critique of the false promises of the middlebrow aesthetic of American Dream mythology. This complex dialectic between middlebrow object and critique of the middlebrow demonstrates the defining characteristic of the American middlebrow as the aestheticization of

an economic product. While the novels critique the “thingness” of the middlebrow, middlebrow publications, readers, and institutions are necessary for their dissemination, circulation, and commercial success. In particular, their relationships to and reliance on other middlebrow cultural institutions mean that, while they offer strong critiques of the inessential and excessive consumerist ethos of the middlebrow, they also perform the middlebrow aesthetic themselves.

*Blondes* and *Gatsby* work to remind readers that middlebrow culture, while it may be oriented toward a concept of the “highbrow” or “high culture,” more significantly “invites a knowingness that creates the literary value that it knows” (Tracy 139). In this way, the middlebrow is a site wherein the dialectical relationship between Americans and American objects Brown refers to is evident. Continuing cultural fascination with the excesses of the Roaring Twenties as well as ongoing allusions to the iconicity of Lorelei Lee suggest that though we should understand the middlebrow as emerging in a particular historical moment, it has continued to “invite a knowingness” today. A more fluid understanding of the middlebrow in scholarship should be able to account both for the continuing appeal of early twentieth-century middlebrow literature and the ways in which the middlebrow itself as an aspirational aesthetic and consumerist ethic has evolved and is ubiquitous in the twenty-first century.

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