GOOD EXPECTATIONS

Adaptation and Middlebrow Literacy

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"I do not think, by the way, from certain
phrases, that Shakespeare liked middlebrows"

— Virginia Woolf, 1922

ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to advance understanding of the ways in which discourses of reading, literacy and culture were used to reify class stratification in mid-twentieth-century America. This project uses the examples of *The Reader's Digest* magazine and *Classics Illustrated* comic books to assess the adaptation and the ideologies surrounding textual form. It examines the efforts of self-proclaimed cultural elites to identify and denigrate middlebrow reading habits through dismissive critiques of texts and audiences as one moment in an on-going historical process of domination and exclusion. These avenues of exploration will reveal the complexity and variance of class definition in a pluralist democracy which, it turns out, are still very much a part of contemporary culture.

RÉSUMÉ

Le but de cette thèse est de faire progresser la connaissance des manières dont les contexts discursifs de la lecture, de l'alphabétisation et de la culture étaient utilisés en Amérique, au milieu du vingtième siècle, afin de réifier la stratification sociale. Des exemples tels que la revue *The Reader's Digest* et la bande dessinée *Classics Illustrated* seront utilisés, dans ce projet, pour illustrer l'adaptation et les idéologies autour de la forme textuelle. Cet ouvrage examine comment ceux qui proclamés par eux-mêmes élites culturelles, ont tenté d'identifier et de dénigrer les habitudes de lecture du lecteur moyen par des critiques dédaigneuses des textes et du public, en un procédé historique persistant de domination et d'exclusion. Ces voies d'exploration révèleront la complexité et la diversité des définitions du concept de classes à l'intérieur d'une démocratie pluraliste, lesquelles, somme toute, cotinuent de faire partie intégrante de la culture contemporaine.

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1955 essay "The Middle Against Both Ends" Leslie Fiedler argued that the dominant quality of the culture of the American middle-class was the revulsion with which it regarded both highbrow and lowbrow cultures. In Fiedler's estimation, American middlebrow culture was actively engaged in a "two-front war"[1] born out of a fear of difference; a difference made manifest in cultural commodities which specifically incorporated the "anti-bourgeois" elements of crime, sex, and violence.[2] The medium with which Fiedler chose to demonstrate this argument was the comic book, a form which he felt had been unjustifiably maligned by middlebrow critics who had, in a moment of irrational displacement, condemned them as a travesty of literature. To the middlebrow critic the comic book was a betrayal of the promise of mass literacy, a rejection of "the benefit for which they were presumed to have sighed in their long exclusion".[3] As a corrective to this misconception, Fiedler suggested a reinsertion of history into cultural analysis. Pointing out that the novel had, in the nineteenth-century, been regarded as an affront to literature, Fiedler insisted that these biases are culturally and historically specific and that they revealed "at least as much about the nature of a period as ... the forms to which they respond."[4]

Seeking to explicate the prejudices of the period in which he himself was located, Fiedler turned to an examination of culture as a social leveller, a contested area in which the political struggles of the times were played out. Class, therefore, assumed an important role in Fiedler's analysis of the middlebrow position. Fiedler argued that the egalitarian mentality of the liberal middle-class threatened to colonize the neighbouring positions held by high and mass-culture, levelling all class distinctions because it regarded established hierarchies of taste as undemocratic.[5] Fiedler further maintained that while the "egalitarians have been defeated" the threat of cultural levelling was omnipresent so long

as middlebrow culture remained at large. The repression of the lowbrow, Fiedler suggested, was attributable not to highbrow academics and critics but to the middle-class seeking a classless society:

> It is not the fully literate, the intellectuals and serious writers, who lead the attack, but the insecure semiliterate. In America, there is something a little absurd about the indignant delegation from the Parent Teachers Association (themselves clutching the latest issue of *Life*) crying out in defence of literature. Asked for suggestions, such critics are likely to propose Reader's Digest as required reading in high school — or to urge more comic-book versions of the "classics": emasculated Melville, expurgated Hawthorne.[6]

This suggestion rings remarkably hollow when one is careful to examine the actual historical record. *The Reader's Digest* and *Classics Illustrated* were, in reality, not nearly as free of controversy as Fiedler would have had one believe. In actuality the position which these publications have traditionally occupied has been, like the middlebrow itself, highly contested. Fiedler's assertion that the middlebrow taste position was a relatively stable one in the Cold War era is extremely problematic given the discourses which surrounded *The Reader's Digest* and *Classics Illustrated* at mid-century. Indeed, in many respects both *The Reader's Digest* and *Classics Illustrated* are emblematic of the high degree of concern which surrounded questions on the relationship between literacy and mass culture; a concern which was played out in public opinion journals in the post-World War Two era.

Recent studies of canon formation have been useful in establishing the notion that literary worth has been derived from the presuppositions of a literary establishment. These presuppositions have led, in the study of twentieth-century literature especially, to a near-exclusive focus on avant-garde and modernist literature. These two genres were selected as privileged sites by critics such as Dwight MacDonald and Clement Greenberg, whose views dominated the critical establishment in the post-War era. Attention to the

avant-garde has, as Joan Shelley Rubin has noted, given license to a generation of American scholars to disregard middlebrow literature in favour of an examination of writers for "little magazines."[7] Attention has focussed on twentieth-century critical movements like the Seven Arts group, New Humanism, Marxism and the New Critics at the expense of literature consumed by millions of Americans. Attempts to compensate for this privileging of high culture discourses have taken, particularly in the United States, the form of popular culture studies. Studies of popular culture have largely focussed on film, television, radio, amusement parks, sports and other forms of mass entertainment in a way which has perpetuated the division between the high and the low rather than calling the interdependence of these two cultures into question. Similarly, little attention has been paid to popular literature in relation to either other popular media forms or highbrow taste.

The study of popular culture has begun to change in recent years, however. Important contributions to the study of middlebrow literary culture — the culture of the majority of Americans have begun to proliferate. Rubin's book, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, for instance, seeks to expand understanding of the precise roles which middlebrow critics played as negotiators of high and low discourses in their self-titled position as cultural experts. Laurence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow*[8] is a useful evaluation of the specific ways in which texts have moved through both popular and elite circles, often simultaneously, and fulfilled roles within each. Janice Radway's recent writings on the Book-of-the-Month Club[9] have also provided a useful means of reinserting middlebrow reading into literary histories. Andrew Ross' work on the discourses surrounding mass cultures in the Cold War period[10] provide an interesting starting point for positioning the rhetorics surrounding culture in a larger political, economic and social frame. Finally, the work of James Gilbert on the construction of mass culture as a form of

moral unease related to the changing role of youth in American culture offers a way of approaching the battle over culture as a response to social upheaval. Despite these valuable beginnings there remains a great deal of work to be done in re-placing popular reading cultures in a context of American literary production and leisure activities and challenging a number of the historical misconceptions about popular literature and its audiences. Often, investigation into the production and dissemination of these texts is backgrounded in favour of audience reception study. In the chapters which follow, initial attempts will be made to develop a social history of the founding of two popular publishing houses and their steady rise to positions of industrial stature and economic prosperity. Most crucially, while much analysis and critique in the past has focussed on the text itself, processes of textual mobility between media is the quintessential problematic of the middlebrow. Literary adaptation does not use a different aesthetic form than the one valorized by the elite but differently organizes it to suit the needs of the medium and its targeted audience, often using only some of the conventions; thus, the heyday of adaptation during the mid-twentieth century best illuminates the crisis of literacy as it became a case of medium over text. While an edited version of *Hamlet* for a theatrical production may have been considered reasonable and apropos to the times, to do the same for a comic book is anathema to the elite.

This thesis is organized into four primary chapters, each of which addresses certain historical discourses which circulated around middlebrow literacy in the mid-twentieth century. The first chapter, "Finding the Middle Ground", establishes the cultural climate in America against which the discourses of literacy were set. It begins with a discussion of the term culture as it evolved from indicating a process of livestock and crop cultivation into a metaphor for human development and societal improvement, eventually arriving as a description of the means by which individuals might be regarded as cultured or civilized.

The specificities by which this conception of culture came to be regarded as a valid means of evaluating various groups both inter- and intra-culturally are also raised an a means of demonstrating the degree to which the notion of the cultured individual was utilised by critics to privilege the tastes and attitudes of the European upper-classes. The concept of the middlebrow audience is introduced to shed light on the degree to which highbrow critics understood their own sense of class privilege as under threat from changes in American social, political and economic organization in the years which followed the Civil War but could not fully articulate their anxiety until the invention of this life-style category in the twentieth century. Middlebrow, as a description of a particular set of texts and audiences, was used derogatorily is assessing the aspirations to class mobility demonstrated by an increasingly educated American populace.

Chapter Two, "Of Lasting Interest", positions the history and production of *The Reader's Digest* in a larger context of changes to the American system of higher education. It will explore the ideologies which shaped the evolution of the American university through four stages: first, its role in the ante-bellum period as a virtual cloister for the training of clergymen; then, challenges of populist forces who argued for a more responsive use of the university to serve the practical needs of the society as a whole; to increasing demands that the university become a place for the pursuit of pure, scientific knowledge; and finally, to a liberal humanist position which maintained that the role of the university was to provide a general education which would create a society of cultured individuals are explored. Changes to the university are discussed in order to provide a context in which the American magazine industry witnessed its greatest growth — a period of specialization in which various magazines targeted specific markets in the expanding professional and managerial classes — and was itself targeted for disapprobation from highbrow critics who regarded the magazine industry as an affront to

serious literary endeavours. The general interest magazine, of which *The Reader's Digest* is the most successful example, utilized the combination of a newly educated populace increasingly concerned with the prospect of "backsliding" and the specialization of the magazine industry in order to carve out their own space in the cultural market. By presenting itself as a collection of the best articles from the specialist periodicals, *The Reader's Digest* capitalized on the widespread cultural belief that a liberal education was a valuable asset and hinted, somewhat optimistically, that the magazine itself could replace the role of the American university.

"Featuring Stories by the World's Greatest Authors", the third chapter, addresses the changing status of reading in the twentieth-century and the ways in which comic books were regarded by highbrow critics as a possible destabilizing force. Looking at the prescriptive advice books which sought to school newly literate audiences in the proper means of approaching texts, this chapter suggests the degree to which the maintenance of class privilege in the cultural realm was dependent on the ability to convince marginalized publics that there was, in fact, a correct way and an incorrect way to read. The history of the American comic book is placed in this context as a phenomena of mass reading which problematised highbrow claims and which was met by a fierce backlash which focussed on the inadequacies held to characterize comic books. The specific example of *Classics Illustrated* is utilised to demonstrate that, despite claims to the contrary, the primary concern of these critics was not the subject matter of the comic books, but the actual form which incorporated elements from both literature and the visual arts to create a new form of literacy which was deemed inadequate by the reading experts. By attempting to provide access to canonical literature for new audiences — and by attempting to raise the general aesthetic standards of the much maligned comic book — *Classics Illustrated* incurred the wrath of highbrow critics who worried that national standards were being reduced by this

tainting of serious literature. The highly successful *Classics Illustrated* series, which published original adaptations of canonical literature from 1942 to 1962, problematised the discourses surrounding the perceived opposition of comic books to serious literature, a position which functioned in much the same way as the classic conception of the middlebrow mediates between high and low cultures.

Finally, Chapter Four, "How to Win Friends and Influence Shakespeare", addresses the specificities of the strategies of adaptation utilised by *Classics Illustrated* and *The Reader's Digest*. A brief history of the uses to which Shakespeare's works have been put in the United States is introduced along with an overview of twentieth-century criticism of *Hamlet* in order to suggest some of the ways in which they play may have been understood in the post-World War Two era. Changes made in the *Classic Illustrated* version in relation to the original are examined in this larger context to suggest the ways in which the creators of the comic book sought to capitalize on the prestige and popular success which the Laurence Olivier film version had earned four years prior. The other pole of the middlebrow text held that self-improvement was a necessary and on-going process. *The Reader's Digest* adaptation of Dale Carnegie's 1937 best-selling self-help book *How To Win Friends and Influence People* is examined in light of the self-help movement in order to demonstrate the degree to which this quasi-therapeutic reading process — though differently configured than in the highbrow arguments about the civilizing effects of canonical literature — was regarded as an intrinsic element in the middlebrow literature of the time. These analyses are set against a broader discussion of the ways in which processes of adaptation have been regarded by scholars as both a means of bringing texts to new audiences in new ways and as a means of tainting original source works.

The discourses which surrounded the American middlebrow culture of the Cold War era display an enormously conservative tone. Certainly there was a significant interaction — and much agreement — between the ideology of the highbrow conservatives and highbrow critics from the left. The Frankfurt School scholars — Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer, for instance — had a contempt for mass culture which rivalled that of the conservatives. Their line of criticism is not examined in this study, however, in order that a central difference between the two philosophies might be highlighted. The leftist critique of mass culture originated with German scholars who sought a means through which the failures of the left could be rationalized. These scholars explained that the working-class did not develop a radical class consciousness because of the stultifying and narcotizing power of corporate-owned mass media. Conservatives, on the other hand, explained the mass media as a failure of the audience to live up to the expectations made of them in the light of increasing levels of literacy. The position of the Frankfurt School scholars rested fundamentally on a disappointment with the working-class and middlebrow audience; the position of the conservative critics centred on a fear of those same publics. This is a crucial distinction as it relates to the weight which is placed on differing definitions of culture. The question becomes what is the responsibility of a society? For the left, that responsibility lay in the creation of the best possible living conditions for all citizens, a responsibility that many felt had been stalled by the biases of the mass media. The neo-aristocratic conservatives, on the other hand, by placing their emphasis not on culture as a way of living but rather as a means of cultivation, suggested that the foremost goal of a society was the creation of lasting highbrow texts which would serve to glorify that society long after it had passed. This emphasis, art above life, was central to the highbrow conception of culture and the middlebrow was regarded as a problem insofar as it departed from that norm. It is this

ideological spectrum which was most prevalent in the mainstream media journals and merits closer scrutiny, not to apologize for the marginalized classes, as some would have it, but to open doors upon strategies of social grouping, taste formation and cultural practice rooted in the real needs and everyday activities of the people whom they served.

FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND: DEFINING CULTURES IN THE COLD WAR

In 1949, a *Life Magazine* article, "High-Brow, Low-Brow, Middle-Brow" represented the question of class to the American reading public in a new way. Citing *Harper's* editor Russell Lynes, *Life* maintained that "gone are the days ... when class distinction was determined by wealth, birth or political eminence."[1] In the post-war era, *Life* informed its readers, the dream of a classless society may not, in fact, become a reality. It was possible that — just as millions of Americans who had taken advantage of the G.I. Bill were leaving universities and hoping to seek out management positions in the burgeoning corporate culture, the rules of the game had been changed. Money no longer guaranteed respect and could even be antithetical to prestige. *Life*'s article, primarily a light-hearted distillation of Lynes' arguments which were elaborated in his book, *The Tastemakers* (1949), is notable here for two reasons. In the first place, the article included a double-spread graphic chart in which readers could "find their places" in the taste categories which Lynes had detailed — highbrow, lowbrow, upper-middlebrow and lower-middlebrow — through eleven separate types of consumer goods and leisure activities By focussing attention, however jokingly, on knowing one's place, *Life* played into an ongoing discourse surrounding culture in which individuals were categorized and valorized according to taste, not heritage or wealth. Inherent in the discourse was the residual trace of the eugenics movement — the term "brow" derived from medical treatises on brain mass and intelligence — and subsequent pressure on readers to improve themselves as they progressed up this cultural evolutionary chain. Equally important, the *Life* article made a rigid equation between culture, consumption and class. Even the choice of categories denoted that this was a game for a particular class: one that was literate enough for the self-professed middlebrow *Life* magazine, who understood the value of art and culture even if it was not properly appreciated and who had the time and income to

purchase a limited number of luxury household items and special entertainments for the purpose of bettering one's mind and social status. While selections of clothes, furniture and even salads were vital components of the new class types according to the *Life* chart, the most contentious and problematic life-style category was reading and literacy. This category enveloped a number of larger issues surrounding education, national heritage and the nature of art. The tendency to relate audience to text allowed the self-named cultural elite to condemn an audience by condemning a text or series of texts. This theme was common to much of the cultural discourses of the Cold War era, serving as it did to not-so-jokingly reinforce notions of class privilege and prestige in an era of ostensible economic democratization. Against this backdrop of cultural anxiety and rapid social change, new ways of thinking about reading became a focal point in attempts to reinforce antiquated distinctions of literacy between classes. Many wistfully remembered an imagined history of aristocrat and peasant in which only the elite read. Now, amidst much hand-wringing, it was declared that only the elite read well.

On Culture

The word culture has endured a long and contested history. In its original context culture generally referred to the idea of cultivation, particularly in reference to crops or animals. In biology, the word culture was utilized to refer to the physical growth or development of specimens. As the scientific meaning of the word became more common, it gradually became extended metaphorically to refer to human intelligence and sensibilities as well as to the disciplines through which it was supposed these traits were themselves cultivated for the greater good of humanity: the arts, literature and philosophy. During the nineteenth-century, the rise of anthropology and other social sciences altered the word. In

the anthropological sense culture referred to a sum total of life practices, objects and meanings which would define a society. When the intellectual and practical uses of the term began to overlap, culture was regarded as a process of development, as a synonym for civilization and human progress. At the same time, the anthropological conception of culture as a pattern of human life experience suggested the possibility that comparisons could be made both inter- and intra- culturally and that no single model of cultural development formed the basis for a universal system of development. These comparisons, dependent as they were on a notion of culture as a human process rather than as an abstracted ideal, seemingly begged certain key questions: On what basis were societies to be evaluated? If culture was to be regarded as an historical process was it necessary to conclude that all ways of living were equally valid?[2] In attempting to answer these questions, the modern cultural critics established a tension between dominant and repressed classes which would shape identities and politics for generations to come.

The Cultured Individual

In evaluating cultures, European critics in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries widely adopted the equation of culture with civilization by celebrating selected practices and texts above others. Tracing a lineage which led primarily to Classical Greece, European intellectuals suggested that the culture of the European upper classes was the fullest achievement of human progress and the pinnacle of development against which other cultures would have to be measured. In privileging their own culture, these critics argued that civilization lay primarily in the less utilitarian aspects of lived experience. The contemplative and artistic endeavours of the time were set above the purely political or economic as a goal to which these other elements were expected to aspire. This distinction between the abstractly theoretical and the commonplace was held to be the primary means

by which the great civilizations of Europe could be differentiated from "primitive" societies whose members were primarily concerned with subsistence.[3]

The establishment of these evaluative terms led easily to the creation of hierarchical distinctions within and between cultures. Drawing on the association of the word culture with cultivation or growth, the notion of being cultured — or being civilized — came into use. To be cultured meant primarily to be knowledgeable about a specifically privileged culture, namely that of the European upper classes. Because this arena of life was fundamentally exclusionary, the concept of the cultured individual was easily equatable with modes of thinking, reading and socializing which were closely aligned with the European, upper-class masculine ideal. As such, the idea of being cultured came, in the nineteenth-century, to play a role as a marker of class, race and gender. By limiting the notion of the cultured individual to such a narrow segment of the population, European critics were able to suggest that the arts — philosophy, literature, painting, music and drama — were fundamentally the property of this class. In constructing the cultural hierarchy in this fashion culture became an additional tool in the process of class privilege and antagonism.

Early High/Low Distinctions

The economic expansion which resulted from the rapid industrialization of the United States in the post-Civil War era generated a tremendous demand for entertainment. Increasing income levels and the move towards a standardized five-day and forty hour work week meant that a greater portion of the population than ever before now enjoyed more constructed leisure time. The demand for entertainment was met in large part by changing communications technologies: the cinema, the phonograph, the radio and, later, television. These new technologies exposed their fledgling audiences to cultures beyond

the local and helped spur a demand for higher levels of education, both in terms of increased public schooling for children and in expanded educational opportunities for adults. Rising levels of education went hand-in-hand with increasing desires to access culture, demands which were met in many areas by improving public access to structures and spaces such as museums, libraries and parks. In the face of culture as a public utility, the privileged class had two potential responses, each of which demonstrated a different understanding of the role of cultural practices. The repression of popular entertainment was an avenue adopted by many. Laws prohibiting drinking, gambling and other forms of spectacle came into effect in an effort to stall their rise. The reformists, on the other hand, sought to usher in a new ear of class conciliation by exposing the historically underprivileged classes to controlled doses of culture.[4] This gesture, made as it was on the terms laid out by the guardians of elite privilege, became the focal point of the liberalist agenda which dominated American higher education during the first-half of the twentieth-century.

Resistance to the admittance of new audiences into culture has stemmed from a minority of cultural critics who viewed themselves as the guardians of that culture. In the nineteenth-century this view was best represented by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and, in the twentieth-century, by T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). Both Arnold and Eliot resisted efforts to extend European minority culture to mass audiences or to recognize mass-produced texts as legitimate cultural artifacts. They further argued that the triumph of mass taste and majority thinking in American society served only to lower overall societal standards and stalled the onward march of human development. The rigid distinction between high and mass culture which Arnold and Eliot articulated reflected a wider hierarchical distinction between Western and non-Western societies. This equation placed the paternalistic distinction between elite and mass culture on the same footing as that between colonial

and colonized societies. The argument was advanced, therefore, to indicate the possibility that mass audiences were not simply stalling progress but actually reversing it. The mass audience and taste which characterized modernity, according to Arnold, had effectively destroyed the organic relationship which he felt had previously existed in European high and folk cultures.[5]

If the relationship between high and folk cultures as an organic expression of a European way of life had, as Arnold suggested, been ruptured, the cause was the technological, political and economic forces at work in the industrial age. A culture dependent on these forces could only be negative and, as a consequence, the phrase "mass culture" entered the discourses as a derogatory phrase. Originally mass culture referred to forms of high culture which had been devalued by mass production: the romance novel was regarded as a diminishment of the novel, popular music as an insult to classical composers. The term was used to refer to new communications technologies which were perceived to be inadequate because they lacked historical traditions and a purely aesthetic development. The distinction between high and mass culture, therefore, was originally indicative of a wider debate about the appropriate production and utility of cultural artifacts and texts. The critics clung to high culture as the process of self-improvement and human development. Mass culture, on the other hand, was dismissed as mere entertainment, mindless diversion and barbaric spectacle.[6]

The Bias of Culture

As Richard Gruneau and David Whitson have noted, most critiques of mass culture have been "profoundly conservative."[7] The critics of mass culture have tended to be those who have most strongly doubted the ability of the masses to ever reach adequate levels of cultural attainment or those who regard high culture as the final road block on

the path to cultural levelling and an end to class distinction. In this line of thought many of the critics of mass culture have presented themselves as the "defenders of tradition, judgement, taste and morality in the face of democratizing and secular tendencies of modernity."[8] It was by utilizing these elements, either separately or in combination, that the early defenders of high culture were so successful in maintaining the status of high culture in the face of public pressure to ease restrictions on that culture. Historically, culture has been defined by those groups who hold dominant power positions and prestige in society. However, these normative claims to culture are always under contestation and the scope and dimension of any groups' dominance is perpetually re-evaluated and reinforced by subtle shifts in its argument to suit the changes in society. By seeking to enhance the notion of culture as a process of cultivation, as opposed to a noun of configuration which would have included processes of human organization and ways of living, the highbrow critics sought to maintain their own position of cultural dominance for as long as possible. One of the most successful avenues for securing dominance was to posit their own evaluative basis for judgement as a universal aesthetic or moral standard towards which other cultures must struggle. Historically that basis has been linked to the vested interests of the cultural, political and economic elite reluctant to adapt to changing societal norms and pressures. One consequence of this method of establishing cultural standards has been to establish as normative sectional and provincial interests as a universal ahistorical standard. It is because mass culture threatened to reinsert historical particularity into the evaluative process that it posed so great a threat to the guardians of elite privilege.

The historical evolution of the idea of culture is, as Raymond Williams has observed, a "record of a number of important and continuing reactions to ... changes in our social, economic, and political life, and may be seen, in itself, as a special kind of map

by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored."[9] Williams' admonition that culture must be regarded as a reaction to changing notions of industry, democracy and class is an important guide post for coming to terms with the problematization of the political and economic relationships embodied in the contestation of culture in the Cold War era. The attempts of highbrow critics to maintain clear hierarchical distinctions between taste cultures and to regard culture as body of intellectual and moral activity separated from the day-to-day activities of a society hinged on the definition of culture as a civilizing process rather than as a noun inclusive of ways of living.

Snobs and Boors: The Problem of High/Low

Van Wyck Brooks suggested as early as 1915 that because of America's pluralistic, democratic society, the struggle between high and low cultures is "quite American, authentically our very own."[10] In Brooks' estimation the problem of high and low cultures in American society could be traced back to distinctions between the conservative theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), who was a representative of the inflexible upper classes, and the popular statesman, Benjamin Franklin (1706-90), who exemplified unmitigated practicality. Prior to the eighteenth-century, Brooks claimed, the ideal American was both "a man of action who was also a man of God."[11] In the eighteenth-century, however, the political and pietic aspects of this whole were split into distinctive parts. Now separated, Brooks suggested that the "purity of type" resulted in a clear-cut distinction between the moral man and the pragmatic man as well as an incompatibility of aims which was represented by these two figures in American history. This distinction was the central determining factor of Americans as a race and, Brooks elaborated, in the society which most immediately felt its repercussions, "the Revolution

became inevitable."[12] Brooks' conception of an ongoing antagonism between practical and contemplative knowledge in the United States dating back to the years prior to the Revolution is a crucial element in the discourses surrounding the struggle over culture in the Cold War era. Repeatedly, critics would stress this distinction and its historical antecedents in order to argue that the division of culture into high and low elements was both naturally and fundamentally American. The primary problem was, therefore, the addition of a third category, a position neither wholly related to Edwards nor Franklin, which unnecessarily complicated this "quite American" cultural equation. Two hundred years after this initial split, the argument had been naturalized and nationalized to such a degree that even conflicting approaches utilized the identical themes and trajectories as Brooks.

Defining High and Low Cultures

In his essay on the middlebrow in his 1949 book *The Tastemakers*, Lynes attempted to summarize the positions surrounding culture as he saw them at mid-century. Lynes argued that in the United States of the post-War era the stratification of economic privilege was on the decline and would not remain the central dividing line amongst classes of Americans. The idea of privilege had parted from the purely economic and was caught up in the question of taste, or the ways in which Americans experienced culture on a day-to-day basis.[13] The lowbrow, according to Lynes' definition, was a cultural consumer completely oblivious to high culture. Typical of the lowbrow's attitudes was that "he knows what he likes," and was primarily concerned with enjoyment without worrying about questions of taste or style.[14] The highbrow, on the other hand, was often envious of the simple pleasures of the lowbrow. Highbrows, by necessity, were burdened with experiencing their culture in every aspect of daily life, even the tiniest of life's details

became an aesthetic and moral statement. The unconcerned lowbrow did not, according to Lynes, bother the highbrow as their cultures were worlds apart. What did antagonize the highbrow, however, was the middlebrow, whom the highbrow wanted eradicated. By blurring the comfortable distinctions between high and low cultures, the middlebrow was regarded as an enemy of real culture. With the rapid increase in university educated consumers, it was no longer possible to determine who was serious and who was frivolous.[15] For the highbrow this determination was central to the maintenance of cultural and class privilege.

The Neo-Aristocrats

The highbrow position has a long and complicated history. Williams suggests that the belief that a cultural minority set apart from the political and social affairs of a broader society is required to protect culture stemmed from a mis-interpretation of the Romantic artist. When the successors to the Romantic tradition suggested that the English Romantic poets initiated an opposition between "personal feeling and the nature of man in society" they misrepresented the actual levels to which those poets themselves embodied this opposition. The division between art and politics was constructed after the historical fact, eliding the poets' own political and social activities in their day.[16] This division between a life of idealized intellect and a life of practical collective organization was the primary structuring element in the highbrow position as it was articulated by, to use Andrew Ross' term, the "neo-aristocrats". Chief amongst these intellectuals was Matthew Arnold, who argued in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that culture was "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world."[17] Arnold's phrase is emblematic of the priorities of the neo-aristocrats. The privileged space of culture was not the lived experience of

individuals but, rather, lay in the text, in the remnants of past social organizations and the evaluation of those societies through a contemporary lens which would judge their artifacts in order to select and maintain the "best" elements.

The belief that high culture was in fact threatened by emerging forms of mass culture was firmly maintained by a number of early critics. F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, for example, lamented that "the machine has brought us many advantages, but it has destroyed the old ways of life, the old forms ... Moreover, the advantage it brings us in mass-production has turned out to involve standardization and levelling-down outside the realm of mere material goods."[18] Jose Ortega y Gasset argued in 1932 that the masses had ascended to compete social power and that culture was, as a result, doomed.[19] For Gasset the distinction between the masses and the minority of people who were serious about culture was clear-cut and precise. The masses made no demands on themselves, "for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves."[20] The modern problem was that the masses were no longer content to merely float but had decided to occupy the cultural foreground previously reserved for the elite. This aberration held, Gasset suggested, dire consequences which "signify nothing less than the political domination of the masses."[21] It was a break from tradition which threatened to eliminate class privilege in favour of greater democracy and ushered in the relaxation of rigid class distinctions in the cultural realm. Gasset's equation of the diminishment of the political authority accorded to privileged classes and the tight control of the cultural foreground is echoed by Leavis and Thompson when they indicated that culture would die if it, like economic and political traditions, were to be superseded by the forward march of the dominated classes. This secularized version of Brooks' earlier critique was couched in a rhetoric of preserving culture. What was common to the neo-aristocratic view shared by

Arnold, Brooks, Leavis and Gasset was a belief in the importance of an ongoing process of class privilege which would maintain the status of European, male intellectuals in the face of rapid social change. Their consensus gave rise to new critical voices concerned not so much with the promising past as with the ominous present.

Raised Voices: Greenberg and MacDonald

Amongst the most important statements on the relationship of high and low cultures in the United States has been Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch", which sought to reify the distinction between high and low through reference not to class privilege but to aesthetic innovation. The avant-garde, in Greenberg's analysis, was one of two distinct cultural formations which arose in the twentieth century Western world as a result of the industrial revolution. Greenberg argued that the avant-garde had, by the beginning of the Second World War, become marked most significantly by its ability to contain its own response to itself.[22] The avant-garde was consequently regarded as a culture which was content-less, as a sensibility which had transcended both politics and society in order to exist on the level of pure abstraction.[23] Kitsch, on the other hand, was to be regarded as the direct product of universal literacy, a development which reduced the ability to read to a "minor skill" and eliminated its association with refined taste. According to Greenberg, one consequence of this increased level of literacy was that the newly urbanized peasants who settled in the cities and became re-classified as the proletariat abandoned traditional folk cultures and "set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption."[24] The culture which was produced as a result of the drive to proletarianization was an "ersatz culture" which performed the dual function of eliminating the spaces of traditional folk cultures while at the same time reducing the accomplishments of art cultures from which kitsch borrowed.[25]

Set in opposition to the avant-garde kitsch was defined most significantly by its tendency to contain the audience's response to the work. Thus, when Greenberg defined kitsch as both a mass-produced and pre-digested commodity form which was devoid of real value or meaning[26] he created at the same moment a blueprint for the critique of commodity cultural forms through the mid-twentieth-century.

This line of criticism was continued by Dwight MacDonald into the 1960s with the publication of the third version of his essay "Masscult and Midcult", an essay which largely replaced Greenberg's distinction between high and low with an exposition of the relationship of both the low and the middle to the high. In MacDonald's estimation Masscult (or the low) is "bad in a new way: it doesn't even have the theoretical possibility of being good."[27] Masscult was the product not of individuals, but of the mass-man (or man as non-man) who was, himself, the product of the Industrial Revolution. For MacDonald, the realignment of the financing and production of culture away from the patron and towards the market had resulted in the creation of cultural works which were pure commodities, stripped of both personality and standards.[28] Reconfiguring Greenberg's notion of kitsch, MacDonald argued that Masscult was best defined through reference to processes of standardization and predigestion which are a requirement of the market and which rule out the possibility of both individual expression and artistic or literary genius.[29] MacDonald argued that while a "serious writer will produce art even when he is trying to function as a hack, simply because he cannot help putting himself into his work ... The reverse is also true: a hack will turn out hack stuff even when he tries to be serious."[30] While it was possible to regard both the high and the low as products of sincerity, only high culture — or culture which is not the product of the market — allowed the possibility of real insight or genius.[31] Thus, arguments of culture, consumption and class cris-crossed generations of intellectuals and artists from the early eighteenth-

century to the Cold War era, raiding what was important for the reification of the elite and their right to name culture and contain access to that culture. At no time in the discourse were the divisions themselves critiqued or the arguments of taste challenged. What remained was a circuitous network of privilege, condemnation and anxiety which circumscribed all cultural debate by the mid-twentieth century.

Farewell to High/Low

The fundamental shift in thinking during the post-War era was the diminishment of discourses surrounding classes, and a concomitant rise in thinking about masses.[32] Masses as a term gained currency in the perceived transformation of the German populace during the 1930s, but, as Williams has pointed out, has a much longer usage. Masses defined three distinct ways of thinking about groups of people. First, there was the concentration, or physical massing, of populations within towns which was one of the results of the Industrial Revolution. Second, there was the massing of people within factories, a massing made necessary by the new organization of production which carried with it a new model of work-relations. Third, there was an organized development of the working-class, a social and political massing. The term derived its pejorative meaning from its associations with the mob, and the traditional characteristics of the mob which were retained in the new meaning: "gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, lowness of taste and habit."[33] By utilising this definition of mass it was possible to regard the working-class as a perpetual threat to culture; the possibility that the mass would overwhelm the free-thinking individual seemed omnipresent. Thus it is possible to see the degree to which the means of labelling a people and a culture as a mass is, in itself, a form of "political or cultural exploitation."[34] If there are in fact no masses, but only ways of regarding people as masses instead of individuals, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the degree to which concerns

about the nature of mass-culture are masking deeper concerns about the possible roles which historically oppressed classes might play in an era of economic, social and political uncertainty.

The Messy Middle

In presenting to the public Lynes' evaluation of American taste cultures *Life Magazine* noted that "The high-brow would like to get rid of the middle-brow but the middle-brow outnumbers him."[35] In Lynes' estimation the majority of the population of the United States belonged to the category middlebrow, which he divided into two sections. The upper-middlebrow were the purveyors of culture: gallery owners, publishers and "cultural do-gooders." Unlike the highbrow who was certain in all matters cultural and aesthetic, the upper-middlebrow consumer was a person who was unsure of his own taste, but nonetheless convinced that taste was of the utmost importance. In a perpetual state of anxiety, the upper-middlebrow was a person who often straddled the line between high and middle cultures. Constantly worried about making the wrong judgements or choices, the upper-middlebrow was regarded as the primary audience for highbrows who manipulated these anxieties. The vast portion of the American public, however, fell into Lynes' latter category of the lower-middlebrow, the consumers of the culture passed along to them by the upper-middlebrows.[36] The lower-middlebrow, like the lowbrow, felt that he knew what he liked, but in reality was unsure and, thus, his tastes were often subject to changing trends. The lower-middlebrow was the typical American family, unsure about everything, the "conscientious stabilizers of society, slow to change, slow to panic."[37] It was to the lower-middlebrow that self-help books, condensations of serious novels and magazine articles, and book clubs were targeted. The lower-middlebrow public was the

American middle, ready to leap onto the newest and latest fads with great fervour. [38] In the discourses surrounding culture in the post-World War Two era it was this group, more than any other, which the highbrow critics feared.

Condemning the Middlebrow

Lynes suggested that the first critic to actually define the middlebrow was Virginia Woolf, in her 1925 essay "Middlebrow". Written in response to a *New Statesman* review of her own work, Woolf started by defining both the high and the low. The highbrow was "the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea." The lowbrow, conversely, was " a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life."[39] Woolf's reaffirmation of the traditional distinction between the life of the mind and the life of the body was not new. What was remarkable, however, was her expansion of this argument. Woolf suggested that there was no natural antagonism between the highbrow and the lowbrow, that in fact there may have even been a reciprocal agreement between them. What interrupted this relationship, Woolf argued, was the middlebrow who attempted to act as a go-between for the two cultures but succeeded only in antagonizing everyone, "they are the busybodies who run from one to the other with their tittle tattle and make all the mischief."[40] Woolf condemned the middlebrow for a lack of commitment to either side, indicating that the middlebrow is "betwixt and between", pursuing neither art nor life but both "mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige."[41] The middlebrow, in supporting only "dead art" or works of sufficient age that their status is no longer in question, was a leech of culture, a serious threat to both high and low. Woolf's conclusion flowed naturally from her overall condemnation: "The true battle lies not between highbrow and lowbrow, but between highbrows and lowbrows

joined together in blood brotherhood against the bloodless and pernicious pest who comes between."[42] This rhetoric of battle, of weeding out the undesirable elements of culture, was extreme even as hyperbole. What Woolf envisioned in her essay was a return to an historical moment wherein everyone was cognizant of his place within culture, aesthetically and, ultimately, economically and politically.

While adopting many of the arguments made by Woolf, Dwight MacDonald was even more insistent about the threat of the middlebrow than his predecessor. In MacDonald's analysis of the American cultural situation in the Cold War era, the middlebrow problem had only worsened since Woolf's warning. By 1960, MacDonald would be despairing that "there is something damnably American about Midcult."[43] Midcult, MacDonald argued, was the consuming bastard offspring of the interaction between high and low cultures: "a peculiar hybrid bred from the latter's unnatural intercourse with the former."[44] According to MacDonald, Midcult had all of the same qualities as Masscult, but was distinguishable from the latter by its adoption of a pretense to high culture, a pretense which Masscult had never bothered to affect. Midcult, therefore, was best characterized as an ambiguity. MacDonald defined Midcult as works which exploit the discoveries of the avant-garde and high culture while doing nothing to advance the cause of those more important forms. Because Midcult, in this view, was actually Masscult presenting itself as high culture or, put another way, Masscult attempting to seize for itself the "great vital mainstream",[45] MacDonald regarded it as a cultural formation to be feared by defenders of real culture. MacDonald wrote that the "tepid ooze of Midcult is spreading everywhere" and was, consequently, threatening to erode the audience for a real or unadulterated culture.[46]

Answering the question of what was to be done about middlebrow culture, however, proved more difficult than simple condemnations in highbrow journals. The

neo-aristocratic call to retreat to the "old class walls" was impractical and unpalatable to MacDonald. Instead of a full-scale retrenchment of political and economic class lines MacDonald suggested that the rightful claimants to culture should "re-create a cultural — as against a social, political or economic — elite as a countermovement to both Masscult and Midcult".[47] That MacDonald would regard this as a serious option as late as 1960 profoundly indicates the degree to which middlebrow culture was not, as Fiedler suggested, simply a stable and expansionary force but, on the contrary, a problematic space regarded — at least in some circles — as a source of genuine unease.

The Critiques of Middlebrow Culture

Common to twentieth-century critiques of mass and middlebrow culture are four recurrent themes, held up in differing contexts as an example of why the popular taste was a threat. The most common of these was the simplest: middlebrow culture was a problem because it was commercial, it privileged the economics of cultural production over the more noble goals ascribed to high culture. MacDonald, for instance, argued that mass culture was "imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audience are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying."[48] MacDonald's comments are interesting for the biases which they reveal. While it would be tenable to suggest that the producers of popular culture were attempting to maximize their audience, the decline of the patron system and reductions in government grants for the arts it is equally simple, as Herbert Gans has noted, to make the same claim regarding high culture in the twentieth-century.[49] What is important in MacDonald's argument is the degree to which the complaint regarding the commercialization of culture immediately slipped into a condemnation of the audience for

that culture, an audience which is reduced to the status of passive spectators, no longer in control of their own minds.

A second criticism of middlebrow culture was that it fundamentally harmed high culture. Unlike low culture, there was no possibility that the two could peacefully coexist. This critique most often suggested that popular culture debased high culture when it borrowed thematic and aesthetic elements from its superior. This debasing tendency was best exemplified, as Ernest Van den Haag argued, when "works are cut, condensed, simplified and rewritten until all possibilities of unfamiliar or esthetic experience are strained out."[50] This argument rested centrally on the belief that the borrowing of elements between cultures, particularly when the borrowing text was perceived as a lower taste culture, taints the original object. This line of reasoning was dependent on a belief that there was something intrinsic to the original text which placed it above the level of the average consumer and, further, that its status was desirable and envied by the lower culture. The concern about the tainting of culture was certainly the dominant expression of an ideology which held that it was important that audiences not only know their place, but also remain in that place so that a particular group might continue to occupy a privileged cultural position.

A third criticism of middlebrow culture took a distinctly paternalist tone in its argument that popular culture was harmful to the audience who enjoyed it. Van Den Haag, for example, indicated that

> All mass media in the end alienate people from personal experience and though appearing to offset it, intensify their moral isolation from each other, from reality and from themselves. One may turn to the mass media when lonely or bored. But mass media, once they become a habit, impair the capacity for meaningful experience.... The habit feeds on itself, establishing a vicious circle as addictions do.... They lessen people's capacity to experience life itself.[51]

Van den Haag's thesis of a narcotized and atomized middlebrow audience was, of course, not borne out by actual experience. The argument that audiences become impelled to make certain cultural selections was a near-total denial of agency masking a deeper commitment to a belief that the majority of Americans required the supervision of properly immune cultural elites. That audiences select the culture which they need and desire, rather than vice versa, was never broached by Van den Haag and his argument rested primarily on a belief that, because the interests of the audience for popular culture were not in line with his own, individual cultural consumers were unable to look out for their best interests and were actively, though ignorantly, working towards their own detriment.

The final criticism of the American middlebrow culture of the twentieth-century was that in addition to harming individual members of society, it harmed society as a whole. The most common element of this argument was that a narcotized audience was the most susceptible to totalitarianism. Bernard Rosenberg, for example, argued that "At its worst, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism. And the interlocking media all conspire to that end."[52] This evaluation found its basis in the notion that the media are powerful enough to overcome other societal institutions such as the family in paving the way towards fascism. The belief, stemming from the 1930s experiences of Germany under Hitler and the Soviet Union under Stalin, was that in an increasingly centralized society, organizations which stand between the individual and the state were increasingly trivialized; thus, the possibility was opened that a demagogue could seize the media and use techniques of persuasion to overcome resistance to state control. Ironically, this argument would fail even before history could play itself out if audiences had been regarded as intelligent agents who selected the culture which they want and need. This anti-totalitarian argument, therefore, ultimately utilized totalitarian tactics by classifying

lower taste cultures as a mass which required strict controls and not as individuals choosing their own practices and methods of learning. None of the four critiques challenged the perceived one-to-one relation between audience and text. They were all predicated on the notion that because the texts were bad, or at least not as good as the elite texts, the audience was also bad — a danger not only to themselves but to the other classes and, ultimately, civilization as a whole.

Conclusions

At its heart, the highbrow condemnations of middlebrow culture reveal a striking contempt for the individual. In failing to acknowledge that middlebrow culture may, in fact, be a desirable and meaningful culture for the majority of Americans, the highbrow critics repeatedly disparaged twentieth century audiences by attacking their culture as commercial, immature, derivative and narcotizing. The basis for this analysis was the privileging of a notion of culture as a civilizing process embodied in certain texts over the more anthropological idea that culture was indicative of a way of life. The extreme to which highbrow critics took this position resulted in a critique which actually glorified the text as the highest achievement of a society. The implication of this belief is that the noblest goal of a society is not creating the highest possible living standards for its members, but rather the creation of the best possible texts. The middlebrow, with its associations to processes of self-improvement and class mobility, problematized this notion by privileging the utilitarian rather than the universal aspects of cultural artifacts. This view of culture threatened the very underpinnings of the elitist notion of class and cultural repression and, as a consequence, was decried by those critics most likely to have their authority curtailed. Raymond Williams has suggested that "the most difficult task

confronting us, in any period where there is a marked shift of social power, is the complicated process of revaluation of the inherited tradition."[53] The United States in the years during and immediately following the Second World War witnessed a period of dramatic social upheavals. The bitter reactions of the guardian of elite culture to changing power structures as they related to the common heritage of literacy indicate both the degree to which culture occupies a central position in the renegotiation of social power and the ways in which class repression is maintained outside the arenas of politics and economics.

OF LASTING INTEREST
READER'S DIGEST AND THE CULTURE OF MASS MAGAZINES

"I have, for the first time, discovered the fun of being normal," writes Edith Stern in a March 1940 *Reader's Digest* article reprinted from *The Rotarian*.[1] In the space of four pages, Stern reveals many of the elements which compromise the philosophy, taste and world view of *The Reader's Digest* at mid-century. Significant amongst these is a rhapsodizing for authentic American rural values, set in stark contrast to the speed and vacancy of modern urbanity. Stern's tale begins when her husband — an urban professional — is laid off and the couple is forced to move to "the sticks". Quickly, however, Stern discovers that it is in rural America where real people live a simpler and more satisfying life than in the big city. The hallmarks of her new life are, not unlike *The Reader's Digest* itself, simplicity and common sense. In the sticks Stern develops the strategies of normal life: she makes preserves with her "colored maid"; mingles with "all kinds of people"; learns to rely on her neighbours and to be relied upon by them; she discovers that plumbers have a "down-to-earth realism combined with a keen analytical faculty" which gives them a political astuteness. From these experiences she arrives at the conclusion that "agitated discussions of ideologies while the canapés are being served won't save the world." Evenings out on the town are replaced by evenings in with the kids. An "abnormal concern in the affairs of other nations" is replaced with isolationist complacency. Manhattan psychoanalysis is replaced by a mother's clear common sense. Yet most importantly, Stern comes to realize that she lives in America "where countless people take the good life for granted."

A Brief History of the American University

The concept of normalcy upon which Stern drew was given a great deal of credibility by Warren Harding in 1920 when he characterized the condition as "more orderly, more manageable, and more placid than whatever else may prevail at any given moment."[2] In times of social change, the concept of normalcy operates as an indicator of an older and happier age — "the good old days". In the first quarter of the twentieth century this term would be invoked as a referent to a pre-industrialized American past; to an imagined history in which the dramatic upheavals in American social organization during the Progressive Era did not hold sway. One of the arenas of American life most affected by this era — and consequently de-normalized — was the system of higher education. Changes in higher education, Dwight MacDonald argued, were one of the driving forces behind the de-normalization of society and the rise of a treacherous middlebrow audience. MacDonald noted in 1960 that the number of university students had doubled since 1945, despite the fact that the population growth of university-aged individuals in the same era had only risen by two per cent. MacDonald argued that this "enormous" student population was the most important fact about the American cultural situation as it carried with it the possibility of renewing high culture as a "living culture." That living high culture, however, might never grow beyond its embryonic state because of the inability of educators to draw "that line between Masscult and High Culture which the rise of the Midcult has blurred."[3] It is necessary, therefore, to briefly trace the history of American higher education through the years which followed the Civil War in order to suggest the ways in which the idea of culture in the first quarter of the twentieth-century was forged in an uneasy association between the tradition of gentility and the burgeoning of professional specialization within the American school and workplace and, further, to

come to terms with the ways in which the American university system contributed, as MacDonald claimed, to middlebrow culture after generations of servitude to elite interests.

The Classical University

A consensus has emerged amongst American educational scholars that the 1860s are "a suitable point in time to consider the beginnings of the present system. It was then that the first definite steps towards secularization of the American college and the modernization of its curriculum were taken."[4] Until that period American universities were, for the most part, remarkably homogeneous. Structured along Protestantist and paternalist lines, the ante-bellum university had considered its mission to be the teaching of a mental discipline. As Yale's Noah Porter articulated the objective: "The college course is preeminently designed to give power to acquire and to think, rather than to impart special knowledge or special discipline."[5] According to its adherents, mental discipline was best accomplished through a rigorous four-year curriculum consisting of Greek, Latin, mathematics and moral philosophy. While some schools made space for political economy and natural history, at the commencement of the Civil War only Harvard had a chair of belles-lettres, and the study of modern literature or the arts was virtually unknown.

Aside from structural rigour, the ante-bellum university was characterized by two traits which would be challenged in the ensuing decades leading to the twentieth century. In the first instance, educators held that the college need not be subject to the whims of the masses. As Laurence Veysey observes, both democracy in the abstract and scholarships for the needy in particular were regarded with suspicion and often considered an evil. Secondly, disciplines were buttressed by a common-sense realism which held that empiricism and idealism were not incongruous. This assumption, and other tenets of Christian absolutism, would be challenged in the university by the rise of science, just as the anti-democratic

nature of the institutions would be placed under siege by a turn towards utilitarianism.[6] The changes which would cast out the definiteness of the older college marked one of the final departures from an American Puritanism originating in the seventeenth-century, and a step towards an America which was increasingly urbanized and worldly.

The University and Real Life

While the belief that higher education should prepare young men for a variety of careers was voiced in the United States as far back as the days of Benjamin Franklin, it was not until the first decade of the post-Civil War era that this viewpoint came to be heard from within the university itself. The position that universities should subordinate the shaping of taste and character to the goal of preparation for real life was enunciated in this era by Charles W. Eliot of Harvard, Andrew Dickson White of Cornell and Charles R. Van Hise of Wisconsin, amongst others.[7] The drive towards utilitarianism which revolutionized American education did not arise from the grass-roots of the nation but came from within, led by administrators and faculty in the applied and social sciences. These scholars rejected the idea of the university as a cloistered training centre for the ministry. They embraced instead the conception of the university as a workshop in which elective courses and student choice would gradually increase at the expense of proscribed studies.[8]

"Reality", the concept against which traditionalist conceptions of the university were placed, was most often described in two specific contexts: democracy and vocational ambition. Democracy in this context held a number of connotations. In the first instance, it referred to an equality at the administrative level between disciplines and between students. The term was also used in a general way to indicate increasing levels of accessibility to higher education which were the result of the abandonment of required knowledge in classical languages as a prerequisite for admission and the acceptance of students of both

sexes and all ethnic origins. This second meaning was invoked by Andrew Draper of the University of Illinois when he declared: "The universities that would thrive must put away all exclusiveness and dedicate themselves to universal public service. They must not try to keep people out; they must help all who are worthy to get in."[9] Alternately, the term democracy could refer to the wide diffusion of knowledge throughout society, or to the more radical idea that the university should take its orders from the non-academic majority because no aristocracy, even of learning, should be permitted in the United States.[10]

Vocational ambition, the other tenet of reality, was the element of utilitarian reform which most greatly impacted on the curriculum of the post-Civil War university. By introducing the elective system, wherein a student might select from a variety of courses, the relationship between the university and student was fundamentally altered. No longer was the student to be treated as a child under the watchful eye of a parental professor; instead he was to be regarded as a stable and internally motivated adult. To this end the construction of dormitories was curtailed and rules of conduct withdrawn. With this new freedom, it was believed, the student would choose to become an expert in a trained field, and newer disciplines such as engineering and schoolteaching were elevated as a consequence. The university graduate, it was held, would serve the community as an expert, as a force for civic virtue who would plunge into real life and liberate it from the stagnant forces of the past.

The Research University

In 1918 Thorstein Veblen wrote "A university is a body of mature scholars and scientists, the 'faculty,' — with whatever plant and other equipment may incidentally serve as appliances for their work."[11] Conspicuously absent from this definition of the university are students, or, for that matter, reference to a social world of any kind. The adherents of the philosophy of pure research in the American university, of which Veblen is an extreme

case, represented an alternative reform movement at odds with the utilitarians. Where the utilitarians sought to integrate the university more fully with the social world, the lover of learning for its own sake "tended to look askance at the democratic social process"[12], and drew inspiration not from American mid-western populism as the utilitarians did, but rather from the perceived experience of the German university.

In the late 1880s the idea of studying science for its own sake was given an enormous boost by the founding of schools such as Johns Hopkins and Clark University, both of which owed a specific debt to the German university. German rhetoric on academic purpose in the nineteenth century was centred upon three complementary notions: the value of non-utilitarian study or pure research; the importance of writing in a general sense, as opposed to teaching; and finally, in epistemological terms, the embrace of an all-encompassing idealism. At the same time German universities, beginning in the 1850s, began to move towards painstaking investigation of particulars. This new tendency was identified by American scientists as the key to German education, even if it was — in point of fact — unrelated to the German conception of faithfulness to idealism. The advocacy of pure science challenged the traditionalist notion of the university. Research, by its very nature, implied doubt. It was this position which was strategically opposed to the Christian university of the pre-Civil War era. Yet at the same time the research university also threatened the utilitarians because its firm insistence on the need for intellectual freedom in the pursuit of pure science allowed no room for social responsibility.[13]

While the research university and the adherents of pure science never achieved dominance in the United States, they were able to introduce a number of educational reforms. Importantly, the growth of research was responsible for the increasing specialization of knowledge which would come to dominate the university by the twentieth-century. Additionally, scholars in the applied sciences introduced a number of new

pedagogical strategies to the university which would replace recitation as the primary tools for education: the lecture, by which a professor might make known his own views; the seminar, which became the dominant means of instruction; and the laboratory.

A Liberal Education

A third reform philosophy was hostile to both the utilitarian conception of education as well as the idea of pure research. Drawing inspiration from the English pattern established at Oxford and Cambridge, the liberal culture approach to the university was defined by Hugo Munsterberg as a "longing for the gentleman's scholarship" which would serve "the practical needs of the masses."[14] Culturist scholars represented the academic wing of the American genteel tradition, invoking the phrasing of mental discipline which characterized the traditionalist university but giving it a cosmopolitan and secular turn. While the introduction of the elective system had provided the champions of specialization the upper hand in the shaping of education in the late nineteenth century, the proponents of liberal culture continued to defend a generalist creed.[15]

The word culture in its humanistic educational context carried with it three distinct connotations; aesthetic, moral and social. The aesthetic sense of culture was a concern with both literary and artistic standards, as well as with canons of taste. These standards could be inculcated in students, it was held, by the development of a proper understanding of five literary elements: a correct appreciation for sound sequence; a knowledge of literary history; the assumption of a necessary correspondence between form and content; the perception of the delicate revelation of the author's personality; and finally, the embodiment of a vital human character in fiction. The moral sense of culture was based on an assumption that the aesthetic elements could be made manifest in personal action, a belief which was given great credence at smaller colleges. Culture's social level, the sense that culture demanded a certain

polish or elegance of style, found a home in the more metropolitan universities. In this way, the cultured gentleman was a person who would willingly subordinate his own desires to a proscribed social code, without compulsion.[16]

The scholars who advocated a liberal culture approach to the university are distinguishable from the traditionalists primarily in their beliefs as to what constituted appropriate subject matter for scholarship. The liberal humanist stress on secular mental discipline meant the addition of modern languages to the teaching of the classics, and contemporary European thought to replace Christian theology. Greater differences appeared between the liberal humanists and the utilitarians. Arguing that the well-rounded man was incongruous with total choice, proponents of liberal culture sought to roll back many of the gains made in the arena of elective courses and student choice in favour of a return to more stringent requirements. The greatest opposition, of course, was to the specialists who practised pure research. The rhetoric of the advocates of culture on this issue often referred to science and research as a "mania" which led to a "loss of mental balance". In opposition to research the culturists suggested that man could be regarded as an end in himself, apart from knowledge. In this way, the advocates of a liberal education made a religion of humanity — what George Santayana termed "orthodoxy among American high-brows" — in which the universe existed primarily for the cultivated, the noble, the gentlemanly and, drawing from Darwin, the best evolved.[17]

Education in the Twentieth century

The twentieth century has seen the longest sustained period of stability and growth in the history of American education. The growth of the university in the United States surged in the period between 1870 and 1930. During that time-frame the number of universities rose from fewer than 500 to more than 1400. Enrolment similarly skyrocketed,

from more than 20 000 students to more than one million during the same period, with total enrolment doubling in the 1920s.[18] Further evidence of the stabilization of the American university in this era can be found in the number of inter-university associations which originate from the first twenty years of this century, including the American Council on Education (1918) and the American Council of Learned Societies (1919).[19] While the Depression of the 1930s may have been expected to have a tremendous negative impact on the American university system, this was not in fact the case. The National Youth Administration, working on the belief that it was preferable to keep young people out of the job market as long as possible, lent assistance to more than two million youths in order that they might attend universities. Due to this assistance there was only one year (1935-1936) during the entirety of the Depression in which an overall decline in national enrolment figures was recorded. At the same time, the government was organizing federal relief for adult education, funding which would eventually reach more than 1.3 million enrolled students. In this period of crisis the American university system came to occupy a more central role in the organization of American life than ever before.[20]

The largest decline in university enrolment came, naturally enough, at the height of the Second World War. In the school year of 1943-1944 the total number of registered students dropped by forty-four per cent. Of greater importance was the post-war expansion of the university. The G.I. Bill of June 1944 provided tuition funding for veterans correlated to time spent in the armed services. In spite of the federal government's low expectations for the program, more than two million veterans registered for the benefits over the eight years which immediately followed the war. The participation of the veterans in this program pointed to a new importance for education at the national level. The President's Commission on Higher Education, published in six volumes in 1947 and 1948, set a goal that "every citizen, youth, and adult is enabled and encouraged to carry his education, formal and

informal, as far as his capabilities permit."[21] By explicitly linking the ideal of higher education to that of democracy the Commission cleared the way for an increased government presence in education funding and policy, a presence which would come into being in 1957 with the launch of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik, and the resurgence of interest in specialized scientific research. By opening up increased opportunities for higher education in the post-war era, the government accelerated the process of cross-fertilization between classes and ethnic groups. Throughout the 1950s, therefore, the education system was shifting downwards in terms of economic class and broadening in terms of race, a movement which would have significant impact on American policy and public attitudes.[22]

The broad changes which swept through the American university system in the century from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the space race had a profound impact outside of the nation's campuses. The increasingly rapid professionalization of the American work-place was aided in large measure by vocational training provided in universities. At the same, a new form of knowledge-for-knowledge's-sake education had been developed specifically for the middle-class by the liberal culturists who gave it their name: the liberal arts program. These changes created an expanded audience for two types of literature which were popular with graduates: the special interest or professional journal; and the general interest magazine. Concerned about the possibility of back-sliding, or losing the education which they had received in university, this population became the primary target audience for magazine publishers in the twentieth century and were, in large measure, responsible for the sales boom which had made the magazine the primary source of American literature by the second decade of this century.

The Magazine in America

The 1920s, suggests James Steel Smith, marked the birth of the modern American magazine as the country "neared the end of a century-long process of conversion from general illiteracy to general literacy."[23] Certainly the rapid expansion in the number of university graduates from less than 500, 000 in 1919 to more than one million in 1929 helped to buttress the idea that broad reading was both intrinsically worthwhile and socially rewarding. Yet the growth of the American magazine also took strength from sources outside of the education system. Joan Shelley Rubin suggests that by focussing on the accumulation of eclectic information the growing system of public lectures originating in the 1820s, and which remained a popular form of entertainment a century later, prepared the way for writing which was not only informative, but interpretive and entertaining at the same time.[24] Furthermore, the rapid industrialization of the United States between 1865 and 1918 reorganised certain American priorities in everyday life. The combination of increasing workforce specialization and the advent of the shorter workday and work-week led to both a need to fill increased leisure time and a desire to acquire a more general understanding of a broad range of subjects as a means of self-improvement. These twinned goals, magazine publishers claimed, could be achieved through magazine reading.

By the 1920s magazines themselves were becoming ubiquitous. Beyond subscription and newsstand sale, magazines were finding their way into transportation terminals, supermarkets — even bookstores. The national network of magazine distribution afforded them a greater national audience than any other communications medium. The most successful of these magazines were the relatively new ten-cent monthlies. In 1885 there were only four general magazines able to boast circulations higher then 100, 000 copies per month. By 1905 that number had grown to more than twenty magazines with a combined

monthly circulation of five and a half million.[25] By nationalizing thought in ways that locally distributed newspapers were unable, general magazines were seen by many critics to be leading America away from the threat posed by an uninformed peasantry or industrial proletariat. The enthusiasm for mass education, to which magazines were seen to be contributing, originated in a firm belief in human intelligence and improvability.[26] It was by this time that magazines had largely come to displace the great books advocated by the culturists as the primary means of self-improvement in the minds of the burgeoning urban middle-class.

A Brief History of the American Magazine

Philadelphia, the birthplace of American civility, also witnessed the birth of the American magazine. In 1741, more than a century since the publication of the first book in the United States and more than a half-century since the first newspaper, two magazines were launched within three days of each other and the American magazine was born. While neither Andrew Bradford's *American Magazine* nor Benjamin Franklin's *General Magazine and Historical Chronicle* survived more than six issues — and indeed only two magazines were able to survive as long as eight years before the turn of the century — a new idea in American communications had been launched.[27]

It was not until the second quarter of the nineteenth-century that magazines were economically self-sufficient. The invention of the cylinder press significantly reduced the expense of printing magazines and virtually every city in America boasted its own literary miscellany, though problems with the U.S. Postal Service maintained the status of the magazine as a largely local phenomenon. During this period the magazine underwent its first great boom, as many as four thousand magazines started and endured, on average, for two years. The end of the Civil War harkened the death of regionalist publications. As political

differences between North and South began to disappear, and as rail construction expanded the frontier westward, the national magazine began to emerge as a significant force. Changes to the Postal Act in 1879 and 1885 made the transportation of magazines both more swift and less expensive, and by the end of the nineteenth-century the national magazine was ready to assume its position as a complement to — and a competitor of — the local newspaper.[28]

A number of additional factors enabled the magazine to rise to national prominence in the post-Civil War era. In the first instance, the majority of magazines succeeded by addressing themselves to constantly narrowing specialized audiences — audiences which newspapers were unable to successfully compete for. At the same time the general-interest based dime magazines benefitted from advances in technology such as half-tone engraving which enabled the publication of photographs which helped them to compete directly with the highbrow illustrated magazines like *Harper's* and *Scribner's* in the creation of a mass audience. Manufacturers, recognizing the broad reach and influence of the new mass magazine, adopted new marketing strategies which sought to put their message before a national audience and increasing advertising revenues meant that magazines no longer counted circulation as their primary source of revenue.[29] This shift, which was to accelerate throughout the early twentieth-century, opened up the magazine industry to criticisms that it was dominated by advertisers and lacked editorial independence. Magazines became increasingly homogeneous, reflecting the conservative business interests of their advertisers.[30] This process towards increasing blandness would lead to the sustained criticism of the mass-market magazine which dominated the discourses about American reading in the middle of the twentieth-century.

The Backlash Against the Magazine in America

In 1929 Johan Smertenko wrote that in America "there are two distinct literatures: the literature of the thousands and the literature of the millions" and that when "Americans consider their literature they are concerned only with the first."[31] The former is, of course, the highbrow literature which Greenberg and MacDonald attempt to maintain as a privileged site. Yet Smertenko is correct in his observation that the day-to-day life of the American people is more strongly influenced by what they read than by what they do not read. What the American people read more than anything else is, as Henry Seidel Canby observed, magazines.[32] Distinctions drawn between a book culture and a magazine culture in mid-century America correspond almost precisely to the types of distinctions made by Greenberg and MacDonald about culture in a more generalized sense.

In 1940 Canby published a comparison of the significance of magazine literacy and book literacy, a comparison which sought to establish that magazine readers and books readers, however much the groups may overlap, seek different qualities in their reading. Canby rejected the idea popularized in the 1920s that reading magazines could lead to the creation of a fully literate individual, arguing as he did that "not even fifteen magazines are a substitute for one good book, written to last, and read to remember." The distinctions Canby drew between the relative values of magazines and books strongly recalled the relationship of authentic culture and a mass produced culture which Greenberg had provided eleven years previously. Magazine reading, Canby continued, is a short-term investment of time which necessarily privileged writing "skilfully contrived to catch [the reader's] attention for brief spells." It was delusional, therefore, to believe that one could become literate by reading magazines. While magazine writing may have been able to "capture a fleeting moment before it expires" it was also incapable of the considered analysis and substance which was characteristic of books.[33]

A similar distinction between books and magazines was drawn by Smertenko when he argued that the literature of the masses was fundamentally insubstantial. As Smertenko saw it, writers in the popular press had forsaken the possibility of establishing a meaningful cultural dialogue when they modified "the patterns they see as artists to resemble the conventional designs which are understood and applauded by the masses."[34] For Smertenko this tendency could be best explained through recourse to the debilitating effects which democracy had had on culture. Just as MacDonald argued that the re-creation of a cultural hierarchy was the only way to preserve high culture, Smertenko suggested that the continued strength of American literature depended on a willingness to "accept the absolute aesthetic verity that pearls have no value for the swine, symphonies no beauty for the ass and philosophy no meaning for the ape."[35] The popular press, Smertenko argues, was doomed because it was brought into being in response to the desires of the many rather than in harmony with the ideals of the few. This was regarded as a distinctly American problem. Smertenko argued a radical take on the culturist position when he suggested that America was endangered because the aristocratic tradition which preserved culture had been eliminated and the masses had been allowed to participate in the establishment of patterns and standards for literature.[36]

Reader's Digest and the Magazine Industry

During the years in which Harvard was transformed from a utilitarian-based university to one more in line with the culturist position, its president, Charles Eliot, had hypothesized in speeches about a five-foot shelf of books which would furnish a liberal education to anyone willing to devote fifteen minutes per day to reading them. The idea which Eliot had latched onto, that culture could be attained by anyone provided that they

were directed to the proper resources and possessed the appropriate level of interest, was the inspiration for the *Harvard Classics* series which was launched as a fifty volume set in 1909.[37] A similar philosophy would provide fabulously successful more than a decade later as it guided *The Reader's Digest* to national prominence.

A Condensed History of The Reader's Digest

That *The Reader's Digest* would come to be regarded as one of the most significant and innovative publishing efforts of the twentieth-century must have been surprising to its founder, DeWitt Wallace. Born in Minnesota on 12 November 1889 and raised on the Macalester campus at which his father taught, Wallace first entered the publishing industry at the age of twenty-six as the publisher of guides to agricultural pamphlets distributed by the federal and state governments. Despite the fact that he failed to realize a profit from this venture, Wallace was determined to continue in the magazine business. Recovering from a war wound in 1919, Wallace struck upon the idea that most magazine articles were over-long, and that they could be reduced to as little as a quarter of their published length without doing damage to the writer's intent. Returning to America, Wallace shopped to publishers the idea of a digest collecting these condensed articles, without success. In 1921, driven by a firm belief in his idea, he and his wife, Lila Bell-Acheson, founded the Reader's Digest Association, which remained wholly owned by the couple until their deaths.[38]

Having borrowed $1000 from friends and family, the Wallaces set about organizing a direct-mail campaign offering one-year subscriptions to *The Reader's Digest* for $3. By the time they returned to their Greenwich Village apartment from their honeymoon more than 1500 subscription requests were waiting for them. With startup capital in place, the newlyweds proceeded to create the first issue, mailed to subscribers in February 1922. The lead article selection was perfectly in temper with the culturist perspective of the times, a

condensation of Alexander's Graham-Bell's *American Magazine* article on self-education. As the first decade of *The Reader's Digest* progressed the Wallaces made only minor adjustments to their venture. They left Greenwich Village for the distinctly pastoral Pleasantville, New York in eariy 1923. Later that same year they moved the table of contents to the front-cover, where it has remained — with a few exceptions — to the present day.[39]

Since 1922 there have been few changes in the basic format of *The Reader's Digest* save for those brought about by rapid expansion. Newsstand distribution was introduced to augment subscriptions in 1929 in order to compete with the growing number of imitators which had appeared over the course of the decade. In the same year, *The Reader's Digest* began to issue their first payments to the magazines and authors whose work they condensed — at the rate of $50 per article — and they managed to sign all of the major publishers, except for the *Saturday Evening Post*, to exclusivity deals, a move which drastically harmed their competition in the digest field.[40] The December 1934 issue brought the *Digest* its first novel condensation, and the first illustrations were incorporated in 1939. Cover illustrations were held back until 1948 and, perhaps most significantly, the *Digest* carried no advertising until 1955, at which time they opted to accept advertising rather than implement a single copy price hike from the twenty-five cents which the magazine had cost since 1922.[41]

Producing the Digest

The growth of *The Reader's Digest* was so swift that twenty years after its inception in a Greenwich Village basement it employed more than 2500 employees at its Chappaqua, New York headquarters. Editorial organization during this period was exceedingly loose. Employing fifty-two editors to produce thirty-one monthly articles, *The Reader's Digest*

inspired loyalty in its staff by hiring established middle-class editors, relocating them to Chappaqua, and then paying them more than double their previous salaries. The job of the editor at a magazine whose very existence was centred round the excision of unnecessary verbiage was, of course, pre-eminent. *The Reader's Digest* method was to remove adverbs and adjectives first. Next to go were descriptive phrases or stylistic flourishes. Exposition was removed in favour of conclusions, qualifiers were taken away. *The Reader's Digest* has steadfastly maintained that their alterations in no way changed the essential idea of an original article, nor its flavour. In the eyes of *The Reader's Digest* editors, at least, all that was changed was length.[42]

The actual production of *The Reader's Digest* was, as John Bainbridge noted, "similar to that used in many factories, except that ... it runs in reverse. Instead of putting things together, it takes things apart."[43] *The Reader's Digest* subscribed to more than 200 general interest and 300 special interest magazines. Each month more than 5000 labour hours went into the first reading of these periodicals, with readers grading each article on a scale of useable, passable, and not-useable. Of these articles, approximately seventy-five were condensed to one quarter of their original length by assistant editors. The condensed versions were then read by the editors, who re-edited twelve for publication. Those twelve had to be re-edited at least three times for clarity and polishing before they were finally delivered to Wallace who, as final arbiter, made the ultimate decision as to whether or not the article would see print in *The Reader's Digest*.[44] In total more than 220 pages of material were produced for the 160 page magazine each month in order that last-minute substitutions could be easily made. The actual printing of *The Reader's Digest* required, in 1950, more than a month with dedicated presses running around the clock.[45]

Reader's Digest *as a Mass Magazine*

Until *TV Guide* surpassed its circulation in 1971, *The Reader's Digest* was the most successful publishing venture in the United States. Beginning with 1500 subscriptions in 1922, the *Digest* quickly expanded its circulation to 290 000 monthly copies by the time it adopted newsstand distribution in 1929. Because *The Reader's Digest* was privately owned it was not forced to disclose its finances to the public at large and circulation figures had to be guessed at by both its competitors and the magazines with which it had agreements. In 1936 *Fortune Magazine* reported for the first time the circulation of *The Reader's Digest*, and set the figure at 1.8 million copies per month, a steady expansion through the worst days of the Depression. By 1944, when *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker* would all withdraw the rights to have their articles reprinted, domestic circulation hovered around the seven million mark. At the same time *The Reader's Digest* was distributing an additional two million copies overseas to servicemen, or one copy for every seven enlisted soldiers. By 1958, when the Audit Bureau produced its first solid accounting of circulation in order to report to advertisers, *The Reader's Digest* sold more than twelve million copies domestically and was read by an estimated thirty-two million Americans each month, or one quarter of the population.[46]

In addition to its magazine sales, *The Reader's Digest* Association augmented its income in a number of ways. In the 1940s it began to publish a scholastic edition during the school year, a publication which generated 600, 000 monthly sales. Editions for the blind were published in braille, and an edition for the illiterate on phonograph. The first international edition of *The Reader's Digest*, *Selecciones del Reader's Digest*, was established in 1940 and quickly became the best-selling Spanish-language magazine in the world. With the co-operation of the Office of War Information foreign editions were established in eight nations in 1943. By 1958 *The Reader's Digest* published thirty

international editions and generated twenty- one million additional sales each month worldwide, bringing the global readership to the seventy million mark. When *The Reader's Digest* launched their book club in 1950 it immediately generated more subscribers than the nation's two next largest book clubs combined.[47]

The impact on the collective mind of the public of a magazine with a circulation as large as *The Reader's Digest* is difficult to gauge, although it is hinted at in a number of respects. Beyond the magazine itself the *Digest* attempted to set the news agenda in the United States largely through delivering stories to the United Press and Associated Press wire services. According to James Playsted Wood, in a typical month *The Reader's Digest* would submit eight to ten stories to the wire services which would result in between three and four hundred editorials in local newspapers.[48] What is clear is that by the 1950s *The Reader's Digest* was the largest source of non-fiction writing in the United States. Equally clear was the degree to which the readers of *The Reader's Digest* identified themselves with the magazine. A February 1955 call for articles based on reader's personal experiences drew 70, 000 responses, and on-going reader supplied segments of the magazine such as "Life in These United States" generated 20 000 submissions every month.[49] What these numbers suggest is the degree to which *The Reader's Digest* was regarded as a serious vehicle for news and opinions in the United States during the 1950s, and the important role which it often played in the day-to-day lives of its readers. This level of attention and influence has certainly not rested with a single magazine either before or since.

The Construction of The Reader's Digest

Despite its origins as a reprint magazine, since 1930 *The Reader's Digest* has published original material. The first original article, entitled "Music and Work," was published unsigned in April 1930, and was described in the table-of-contents as a "special

compilation for *The Reader's Digest*."[50] The policy to print original articles was justified as a hedge against the possibility that the Depression would claim a number of the *Digest*'s source magazines. In reality, however, *The Reader's Digest* had narrowly survived a rebellion on the part of its co-operating magazines in late 1929 when *Scribner's* discovered the extent of the *Digest*'s circulation. While no magazines actually defected from the fold at that time, it was certainly enough of a threat for Wallace to determine that original articles were the way to go. The first acknowledged original article, "The Burning Question" by editor Henry Morton Robinson, appeared in the February 1933 issue, and initiated an ever-increasing spiral of original contributions.[51]

The foundation of the *Digest* is its book condensation which has appeared as the final article in every issues since 1934. Additionally, filler material is used to round out pages when articles run short. As Wood observed, "*Digest* fillers are a trade-mark of the magazine."[52] From 1929 until 1953 *The Reader's Digest* had the Cleveland office perform no task other than gathering filler material. In 1954 this office was discontinued because the *Digest* discovered that it could let its readers perform this task more efficiently than a research staff. By paying $100 for each filler submission used, the *Digest* created a two-way means of communication, allowing its readership to feel more involved with the publication, and shrinking its own costs at the same time.[53]

The most controversial type of article published by the Digest were articles which the editors termed "plants". Planted articles are those which originate in *The Reader's Digest* offices as originals and then are submitted for publication in other magazines with the understanding that they will be condensed by the *Digest*. This tactic, of course, saved the *Digest* a tremendous amount of trouble. It knew exactly what the final product would be because it was, in fact, written first. This was a contentious issue for many magazine editors and publishers because it was regarded as an attempt by *The Reader's Digest* to take

insidious control of the American magazine industry. *The Digest* would pay the sown magazines to publish their articles with full knowledge that it was money which many struggling periodicals could not afford to turn down. *The American Mercury*, for example, paid its staff with the money it derived from publishing more than sixty *Reader's Digest* articles in the years 1939 through 1943. At the same time planting helped to blur high/low distinctions in the American press. Traditional distinctions between the highbrow and lowbrow based on a quality of writing arguments were increasingly difficult to take seriously when the lowbrow *Digest* found little problem in getting their own original writing into the very magazines which had condemned them. Amongst the papers sown between 1939 and 1943 were *Harper's* (eight times), *The Atlantic Monthly* (eight), *Commonweal* (nine), *The Yale Review* (four), *The Nation* (five) and *The New Republic* (twenty- one). George Bennett's review of *The Reader's Digest* in this period indicated that of 1, 718 identifiable articles only 720 were genuine reprints, 316 were originals in the *Digest*, and the remaining 682 were planted and reprinted. In other words, fifty-two per cent of the *Digest*'s articles originated in their offices by 1943.[54] What the *Digest* was purchasing with their planted articles was, in point of fact, not far removed from what they and cultured reformers like Charles Eliot were selling: the prestige of a well-read facade at the cost of a mere fifteen minutes per day.

Reader's Digest as a Middlebrow Text

In writing of *The Reader's Digest* in 1981 Dana Thomas found it instructional to compare the success of the *Digest* to the decline of *Harper's*:

> Since the second World War, the growing egalitarianism of American society has swept everything before it. There ae no contemporary H. L. Menckens dedicated to pulverizing the pretensions of the Booboisie. Writers with

> Mencken's critical gifts and lethal vocabulary have been co-opted by the Establishment to receive its heady emoluments. Elitism has become a dirty word in the lexicon of today's society.[55]

Thomas concluded that the decline of magazines such as *Harper's* (which was saved from bankruptcy in 1980 by the John D. and Catherine MacArthur Foundation) was a result of Madison Avenue advertisers who had a vested interest "in a homogenized society where sheeplike behaviour is essential to the consumption of the mass-produced goods and services spewed forth by American industry."[56] There are no magazines left to publish the likes of Mencken anymore, laments Thomas, contemporary magazines are written to please the reader's short attention-span and lengthy "thought" pieces are seen as indigestible. This, of course, was no surprise over at *The Reader's Digest* where they'd been publishing the enormously successful anti-intellectual magazine since 1922 based on a simple formula that magazine articles should be written to please the reader, not the writer or the editor.

Article Types in The Reader's Digest

Since its inception, *The Reader's Digest* has marketed itself as a "service to readers". The inside back cover for the very first issue of the *Digest* included a subscription card which could be passed along to friends and relatives. The card informed the potential subscriber that "*The Reader's Digest* is to be regarded as an exclusive *service* to members of our Association."[57] The nature of that service was personal improvement. A subscription to *The Reader's Digest* meant that the hurried reader no longer had to worry about missing out on edifying magazine articles since here was a digest of them all. The slogan which appeared on the first page of every issue from 1923 to 1939 was "An article a day from leading magazines, in condensed, permanent booklet form."[58] For an audience caught up in a social order increasingly concerned with the appearance — if not necessarily the substance — of liberal culture, looking everywhere in attempt to buy their way into social status, what

could be simpler? *The Reader's Digest* played upon these fears relentlessly with publications of self-improvement articles. Ads for future issues informed the potential gentleman of just how easy it was to become cultured, college graduates need not fear back-sliding while those who never attended could acquire all of the benefits regardless: "To acquire knowledge is not easy — few of us have the time. You can acquire a broad understanding of the world — a liberal education — in a pleasurable way by reading *The Reader's Digest*."[59] Indeed, early surveys of *The Reader's Digest*'s subscribers found that they considered the service a bargain.

When asked to explain his magazine's guiding formula, DeWitt Wallace responded in generalities:

> Primarily, we are looking for articles of lasting interest which will appeal to a large audience, articles that come within the range of interests, experience, and conversation of the average person. The over-all emphasis ... has been a more or less conscious effort to promote a Better America, with capital letters, with a fuller life for all.[60]

This description, of course, fails to inform on one key point: what exactly is an article of lasting interest? One possible solution might be found in turning to those articles which *The Reader's Digest* so enjoyed publishing that they printed them on more than one occasion. Bainbridge classified these repeaters into six broad categories: In the first instance there were "Book of Knowledge" articles such as "What Makes People Laugh?" or "Where Do We Get Our Prejudices?" which contain a large number of facts; second were the crusades which *The Reader's Digest* regularly launched against smoking, unpleasant sales clerks and other well-intentioned, if slightly misguided, topics; third were the controversial articles on topics like immigration ("Can We Have a Beautiful Race?") and other right-wing issues; and other repeaters included articles on animals, health and the art of living ("To Bore or Not To Bore"), all of which demonstrate an unflagging optimism.[61] "Lasting Interest", therefore, might best be described as a combination of optimism and simplism.

The Tone of The Reader's Digest

The twin pillars of *The Reader's Digest's* success in reaching a mass audience were, according to Bainbridge, the philosophies of optimism and simplism. Optimism in *The Reader's Digest* was best exemplified by their medical articles — known euphemistically as the "New Hope" series — which generally promised that a cure for any given ailment was "just around the corner".[63] In the post-war era, however, optimism was the outlook to be taken. The average incomes of all Americans rose in the 1950s by twenty-six percent, and instalment buying allowed many families to increase their standard of living to an even greater extent. Yet despite all the hopes of a new economic democracy, the suburban dream was just that for the majority of Americans, and only the top forty percent of all wage earners in the United States in this period increased their actual economic status.[64] For *The Reader's Digest*, which had preached the value of poverty during the Depression, the fact that suburban bliss was an unreality for the majority of Americans seemed not to matter. To *The Reader's Digest* misfortune was a blessing in disguise and, as Bainbridge points out, "the *Digest* is able to find something good about nearly every aspect of life, from birth to death inclusive."[65]

Simplism, the other stone to which *The Reader's Digest* anchored its fortunes, is the philosophy that "no matter how complicated the issue discussed in a *Digest* article may be, the article contains nothing that cannot be grasped readily by a high-school student of average ability."[66] The simplism of *The Reader's Digest* owed much to the rise of the great popularizers of the 1920s who serviced the newly literate populations who had grown up in families without exposure to a literary heritage. "Behind in all kinds of knowledge," Smith noted, they were "ready for anything that offered a quick catching up."[67] *The Reader's Digest* promised to fulfill that roll, to guide the unlearned with simple formulas and plainly stated opinions. Wood, writing in defence of the *Digest*, argued that *The Reader's Digest*

did not reach seventy million readers each month "by being profound, esoteric, and difficult to understand ... It reaches [them] through the compression that means that only the high-spots of a discussion can be presented, and these set forth in black and white clarity."[68]

By the end of the Second World War, unrestricted immigration to the United States had been curtailed for a full generation. Between 1940 and 1960 the percentage of Americans born outside of the United States had fallen from 8.8 percent to 5.4 percent. These changes, as Roland Marchand has observed, were reflected in a decline of carriers of ethnic culture in the form of foreign-language newspapers, theatres and social organizations. In short, the popular culture of the United States was approaching a level of homogeneity previously unknown. At the same time, the popular culture of the war-time era, such as the Norman Rockwell everyman, was promising unity through explicitly democratic themes and the economic effects of the war continued the modest income redistribution from rich to poor which had begun in The Depression. In the post-war era, regional and class differences began to dissolve, and national media institutions — particularly the big four general interest magazines: *Life*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Reader's Digest* — witnessed a rapid expansion of their audience. In short, the dream of the single-class future which had been imagined in the 1930s seemed to be on the horizon,[62] and *The Reader's Digest* precipitated the culture which would bring it home.

The Politics of The Reader's Digest

That *The Reader's Digest* could set forth a complicated discussion in "black and white clarity" should not be too surprising given the terms under which *The Reader's Digest* generally approached complex issues. DeWitt Wallace and his editorial board often saw the complex problems facing the United States and the rest of the world in terms of black and

white, a simplism on their own parts which would be roundly criticized by more serious magazines like *The Nation* and *The New Yorker*.

The Reader's Digest's insistence that it never changed articles in order to bring them in line with the ideologies of its editors should not be in doubt, for it is obvious from even a cursory glance at the magazine that pieces with which they disagreed were simply passed over in the search for more hospitable terrain. While the *Digest* maintained that it was ideologically neutral, it's politics were — in point of fact — definitively right of centre. In the period between 1939 and 1945, for example, *The Reader's Digest* published sixteen articles about trade unions which were completely unfavourable and three which were complimentary. In the same period, articles critical of the New Deal led favourable pieces by a three to one margin. In regards to charges that the *Digest* was racist and anti-Semitic, the editors pointed out that they had run more favourable articles about blacks and Jews than unfavourable, which, though true, indicates at least that the editors saw both sides of these questions.[69]

The editors themselves included a veritable who's who of right-wing thinkers at mid-century. Perhaps most notably, the editor in charge of international relations and foreign policy articles was former Trotsky translator and *The Masses* editor Max Eastman, whose conversion from communism can only be described as fanatical, and who became famous as a witch-hunter of American liberals. Other editors included Eugene Lyons of the right-wing *American Mercury*, Stanley High of *The Christian Herald*, and Fulton Oursler, the author of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.[70]

Reader's Digest *as a Problem*

While the ideology of *The Reader's Digest* was attacked by liberal magazines of the period, the magazines' politics were never front-and-centre in the criticisms. *The New*

Republic, announcing ten years after they printed their first *Digest* plant that they would do so no more, argued that the *Digest* had developed an editorial policy which "rejects a substantial amount of good writing in the magazines which does not conform to its specialized political and social views."[71] Yet at the same time as it was urging *The Reader's Digest* to "take its place openly as an extremely conservative magazine," *The New Republic* was attacking the "aggressive" business attitude of the *Digest*. The problem, it seemed, was not so much the politics of *The Reader's Digest*, but the popularity of it. As James Rorty noted in *Commonweal* in 1944, *The Reader's Digest* was a ubiquitous force in American literature: "its spread includes all regions, all economic classes, all sects, all ages, from high school up, with the proportion of *Digest* readers highest in the higher income and education brackets."[72] Those readers in the higher income and education brackets, of course, were regarded by the highbrow literary magazines with proprietary interest and no small degree of bitterness towards the *Digest*. When *The New Yorker*'s Harold Ross publicly revealed in 1944 that *The Reader's Digest* had been planting articles in highbrow magazines, the denunciations from those same magazines could not come fast enough.

In a press release announcing their decision to no longer contribute to *The Reader's Digest*, the editors of *The New Yorker* wrote:

> *The New Yorker* ... has never been particularly impressed with the *Digest*'s capsule theory of life and its assumption that any piece of writing can be improved by extracting every seventh word, like a tooth. We have occasionally been embarrassed to see our stuff after it has undergone alterations.[73]

Yet *The Reader's Digest* had always been very forthright about the fact that the types of articles which were selected for republication were not entirely limited to conventional notions of quality. In a 1950 article appearing in *Writer*, the editors of *The Reader's Digest* revealed something of their own understanding of the types of submission which were of primary importance to the success of their magazine. The types of articles which the editors

called for included reports on life in the United States, quips, puns, "tangy sayings", jokes, retorts, "lightweight, short, uncomplicated quotable lines uttered by contemporaries," personal glimpses and human interest stories.[74] In a similar article published six years previously, Marc Rose, then senior editor of *The Reader's Digest*, had explained to aspiring contributors that the most salable pieces were those which could be classified as "uplift pieces" or as "self- help." The motivating factor in this instance was the belief on the part of *The Reader's Digest* editorial board "that to each and every reader the most engrossing and utterly fascinating subject in all the world is himself."[75] Thus, by their own freely and openly given admission, the success of *The Reader's Digest* was attributable not to the tendency towards selection of the best of American literature, but rather the ability to evaluate submissions based on the broadest human appeal, or by the process of "getting as close as you can to the reader's self-interest."[76]

For cultural critics who argued that mass culture was overly concerned with pandering to the masses by "constantly publishing stories which make the sole point that the commonplace man is preferable to the original and unique individual,"[77] these types of admissions were extremely damning. Rorty, for instance, argued that *The Reader's Digest* was "deficient" in terms of carrying out the primary duties of a free press:

> But it remains true that the millions of people who depend largely on the *Digest* for general information are in danger of intellectual malnourishment and ideological deficiency diseases, with consequent lowered resistance to the political degeneracy and the social infections that become epidemic in a democracy when its press fails to discharge its responsibility.[78]

What is most interesting, however, was the way in which the mass magazine became conflated with its readers in the criticisms of the highbrow critics. The tendency towards simplism in *The Reader's Digest* became a defining characteristic not only of the magazine, but of the audience for the magazine as well. In 1962 *Time Magazine* wrote of *The Reader's Digest*'s "infallible instinct for middlebrow tastes" in the same paragraph as it

described the content as "simplified and condensed to accommodate a notion of brevity or a reader's attention span."[79] The aspersions cast on the readers of *The Reader's Digest* were even reflected in the opinions of the magazine's contributors, one of whom told *Time* that the magazine's main appeal is to "intellectual mediocrity" and that Wallace's own "strictly average" mind "completely reflects the mentality of his readers" who liked the *Digest* because "it requires no thought or perception".[80]

This disdain for both the content and the audience of *The Reader's Digest* was equally reflected in discussions of the possible consequences which mass literacy may have in store for a totalized American culture. In the most positive terms it was sometimes held that *The Reader's Digest* could have a positive influence on a high culture if it led to the creation of a larger book consuming public. This was the position maintained, for example, by Kenneth Payne, editor of the *North American Review*, who argued that the net effect of *The Reader's Digest* was to increase the circulation of all magazines.[81] Similarly it was held by many book publishers that *The Reader's Digest* was, in fact, positively correlated to a book purchasing public, a belief evidenced by the large number of unsolicited manuscripts which the magazine received from publishers each month hoping for an opportunity to have their books reach millions of homes in condensed form.[82]

Yet the concept of mass literacy was not always regarded with this high degree of charity. Greenberg, for example, argued that a necessary precondition for kitsch was the availability of a "fully matured cultural tradition" and further believed that kitsch was fundamentally a leach of this mature tradition. He argued that kitsch borrows only "tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, [and] themes" from high culture, while at the same time discarding what is truly valuable about that tradition. In this way "when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new 'twists', which are then watered down and served up as kitsch."[83] Following this line of reasoning, a mass cultural text was not only incapable of

leading a mass audience to higher culture, but could merely hope to simplify aspects of an existing cultural tradition in order that those aspects might be predigested for a larger public. The argument that popular cultural texts watered down complexity and real culture was, of course, made about *The Reader's Digest*. *Time Magazine*, for instance, argued in 1951 that "Wallace tries to make the *Digest* simple enough for almost anybody to understand. But in making reading painless, he sometimes oversimplifies complex questions to the point of absurdity." The effect of this type of reduction, it was argued, was to create a dangerous climate for ongoing social, political and cultural dialogues: "The dangers in this kind of primer-reading, as Harvard's Howard Mumford Jones points out, is that 'children get to thinking that everything should have the same order of clarity. When they come up against something that is difficult they don't know what to do'."[84] This was, more often than not, the reaction drawn from cultural critics of *The Reader's Digest*. The magazine which Fiedler confidently described as unproblematic literature for a colonizing middlebrow culture was, on closer inspection, the subject of a variety of complaints about the diminishment of American literacy.

Conclusions

In the same issue of *The Reader's Digest* in which Edith Stern wrote of the joys of leading a normal life there appeared another reprint which sheds considerable light on the preoccupations of *The Reader's Digest*. "Radio *versus* Reading", a condensation of Edwin Muller's *New Republic* article detailing the results of Paul Lazarsfeld's Princeton study of radio-listening habits of Americans, charted a curious path through the high/low debate. Muller's article evinced some worry about the ability of the mass medium of radio to influence public opinion. Noting that "a very large portion of those non-reading people who

do listen to political addresses on the air are the 'suggestible' type,"[85] the article adopted the terms of discussion utilised by highbrow critics against magazines like *The Reader's Digest*, to claim that the radio-listening audience might hold an undue influence over public opinion and were ripe for the picking by any political demagogue who could sufficiently control the media in order to lead them. The article continued in highbrow terms to deem literacy as the solution against the possibility that the nation might be taken over by lowbrow radio audiences. However, the reassuring final paragraph — itself a *Digest* trademark — reversed the argument which had been made throughout the body of the essay when it mused that radio might not constitute a serious threat after all: "There would seem to be less and less likelihood, then, that radio will displace reading.... [Radio's] ultimate effectiveness will be determined by the stimulus it gives to other means of acquiring ideas and information."[86] So pervasive, it seems, were the arguments for the improving qualities of literature along with the degrading effects of the mass media that even the quintessential mass-market magazine could adopt the discourse and utilize it towards their own ends. While university educations may have laid the foundation upon which the successes of middlebrow literature were built, not all Americans, it was clear, were headed to universities. The on-going success of the middlebrow literary venture was dependent on the ability to win over potentially new audiences to the value of reading as a source of self-improvement, an extension of the liberal humanist viewpoint which *The Reader's Digest* — and other middlebrow cultural producers — were only too happy to echo.

FEATURING STORIES BY THE WORLD'S GREATEST AUTHORS: *CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED* AND COMICS AS CULTURE

In April 1944, *Magazine Digest* — one of the longer-lived *Reader's Digest* copycat magazines — published an article by Margaret K. Thomas exalting the pedagogical possibilities of comic books.[1] Thomas described the efforts of Harold Downes, a Lynn, Massachusetts high school teacher. Downes asked DC Publications, publishers of the Superman line of comics, to allow the school to use the character and image of Superman in a workbook for lessons on grammar, punctuation and word-meaning. DC comics were, the article informed its reader, thoroughly checked by a panel of "prominent educators and psychologists," to ensure that correct language usage and "psychologically sound action are guaranteed." The comics may have used slang in order to reach the youth of a new America, but "we never use bad grammar. And sex and smut are out." Additionally, the comics included sound advice on topics ranging from sidewalk safety to the hopelessness of gambling. Large-scale national efforts at this type of education were, Thomas asserted, on hold because of the paper shortage, but she was hopeful that once peace was declared "things are going to boom" and "comics will become the textbooks of the future."

As it turned out nothing could have been further from the truth. Comics did not enter the classrooms of America as teaching aids, instead they were castigated by educators and public leaders as a primary cause of illiteracy. Five years after the war's end, R. Ronson wrote of comics in *National Parent-Teacher*: "This narcotic kind of reading is contributing in no small measure to our deplorable national illiteracy."[2] That the status of comics as literary objects could be altered so swiftly is a testament not only to the changing temper of the time but, more importantly, to the fluidity of the term *literacy* in the mid-twentieth-century America.

Literacy in Mid-Century America

In his 1946 self-help book on reading, *Reading For Self-Education*, W. E. Schutt justified interest in the topic by suggesting that reading can be elevated from "just another method of passing the time" to something more substantial: "It will help any man to find himself, to make the utmost of himself, and to express that self to others at its full value."[3] Schutt's was just one example of this argument. It arose in a number of self-help books on reading which were published in the first half of the twentieth century. The promise of increased social skills from improved reading ability has a long history in American thought. The rapid spread of education across the United States coupled with the advent of American industrialism helped generate a wide-spread belief in the possibility, however theoretical, of a classless society in the post-war era. Literacy, as it related to one's ability to appear publicly amongst one's peers as a self-styled complex individual, had emerged as a barometer of personal capital. Maximizing the anxiety of many Americans, a host of self-help guides were published. J. B. Kerfoot argued as early as 1916 that the twinned goals of the reader were "To get away from ourselves" and at the same time "To find ourselves."[4] Finding oneself, naturally, was the superior goal; for once found, one could step onto society's stage as an equal participant in an ongoing history of humanity.

There were a number of proposed methods to solve the problem of literate sociability. However, two extreme positions can illuminate the scope and sense of gravity which accompanied theories of reading, since the common thread to all was that the failure to become literate had potentially dire consequences. Robert Rogers, whose guide to reading appeared in 1929, targeted his book at the aspiring middle-brow consumer, the "average serious reader." Rogers' reader had "little gnawing doubts" and was bothered that "people seem to see more in a book than you ever can."[5] Rogers' goal was to help people

through "Helpful Hints" on the meanings of style to separate themselves from the masses, and distinguish themselves from the "brainless" mass of humanity who do not react to great literature. Rogers' position was that there were no faults in canonical literature and that each text produced a distinct reaction in the mind of the reader. Extending this argument, Rogers reasoned that if a reader had no reaction to a so-called great book then that reader obviously had no brain and could never become a productive member of society.[6] Rogers, ironically, can be regarded as a moderate in this debate when compared to some of his contemporaries. Ezra Pound took an even more extreme view of the hopelessness of the lowbrow reader, arguing that helpful hints were not only unnecessary, they were not even a proper beginning. Rejecting the self-help ideal expressed by Charles Eliot's Five Foot Shelf of *Harvard Classics*, Pound insisted to the contrary on a return to rigorously applied standards.[7] Literacy, in Pound's view, was lost on the English reader. Pound, who saw the beginning of the end of history in the shift from the uninflected languages of Greek and Latin to the inflected languages of contemporary Europe, argued that to be literate required a familiarity not only with all European languages but also Greek, Latin and Chinese. For those who read only English, Pound shrugged "I have done what I can"[8], but essentially the reader was out of luck, mired forever in the half-measures of culture. Pound's highbrow pretensions about the necessity of languages was an excessive example — almost a parody — of the self-help movement in literature. At its heart, his argument shared much with those who advocated on behalf of the middlebrow reader: a prescription for the correct way to read, a canon of literature which comprised a program for reading, a justification for entering into his program, and a warning against those who choose not to follow his advice.

Hooked on Classics

Central to the wave of self-help books on reading which proliferated in the United States during the first half of the twentieth-century was the idea of an authentic and unproblematic literary canon. While the belief that the Arnoldian dream that the "best that has been thought and written" could be systematically quantified was common to these guides, the criteria for "the best" demonstrate some variance within a set of narrowly defined parameters. Pound's conception of great literature as "language charged with meaning to the utmost degree possible"[9] was his context for evaluation but, like most of Pound's theories, was too abstract for the aspiring middlebrow. Most critics, for whom Pound expressed contempt, extended the meaning and importance of the canon beyond the purely literary. Schutt placed the locus of any definition within the moral sense which could be located in the literature, suggesting that great books offer the reader models for proper behaviour.[10] Rogers, alternately, defined the classic as a work of literature "written in the past, the qualities of which are notable enough to have kept it alive in the memory of later generations or centuries as an example of excellence."[11] He outlined three criteria for the establishment of a work's status as classic: continuing relevance, critical tradition and the influence which the work has had on other works.[12] By defining the classic in terms not strictly linked to the aesthetic or moral sense of the particular work Rogers most clearly exemplified the liberal tradition. Classics, according to the liberal conception, were not intrinsically worthy but were valuable for their utility. They guided readers towards self-improvement in order that they might adapt more fully to contemporary society. Great literature, suggested Rogers, set an example for the reader because it was important, respected and influential.

Aesthetically, the obverse of the classic in this period was the mass-produced culture of advertising, news leads and comic books: the culture of the short sentence. Rogers'

suggestion that the short sentence had seriously curtailed the intellect of the American public was in line with much scholarly writing emanating from the Ivy League universities when contrasting the classics with contemporary writing. For example, Rogers excoriated the taste of the middle-class by suggesting that books which are used only "to pass the time" would fail to "engage the emotions" or "do violence to ... the accepted beliefs, prejudices, or notions of the average majority."[13] Rogers' definition held, by implicit contrast, all great literature of the world and its civilized readers in great esteem. The corollary nemesis to great literature, even worse than the middlebrow text, was mass-produced writing, which he criticized for being "weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable" when set against the classics.[14]

Yet, as MacDonald and Greenberg illustrated, the connection between the aesthetics of mass culture and the supposed effects of mass culture is crucial to the notion of an important literary heritage. Pound, for example, suggested that the classics provided an inoculation against modernity.[15] Rogers took another tack, suggesting that the classics were a defence against the lowbrow reader, a reader which constituted "the greatest danger to our civilization."[16] Rogers positioned himself against the democratic ideals which characterize middlebrow defences of the classics by dismissing the idea that anyone could benefit from education as "utterly wasteful and extravagant. And futile."[17] Schutt, in contrast, did not go so far in abandoning hope for the uncultivated reader. Yet the moralism which he attached to the classics, the idea that one should base one's life upon the examples set by noble characters in noble literature, extended his argument that one becomes a better person by adopting better reading habits. By criticizing "a worth-while novel read lazily"[18] Schutt made clear his contention that there were fixed means by which culture and discrimination are developed, and further indicated that these means lie in the province of literature read at a level beyond that of the so-called average reader.

How To Read a Book

The best-known — and most widely read — self-help book on the subject of reading was Mortimer Adler's 1940 text, *How To Read A Book*.[19] In Adler's understanding of the liberal education the imperative was, most clearly, a perceived connection between liberalism and democracy. To stand for one, suggested Adler, was to stand for the other: "More than educational reform is at stake. Democracy and the liberal institutions we have cherished in this country since its founding are in the balance."[20] Against democracy was fascism, an ideology whose entry into the America of mid-century had been primed by the teaching of passivity in the form of watered-down standards of excellence across all social systems and structures which contributed to a dilution of resistance to "specious authority."[21] The solution was a return to the classics in a disciplined fashion. American democracy and capitalism depended, Adler suggested, upon specialization in the industrialized workplace and "grace" in times of leisure.[22]

How To Read a Book was explicitly targeted at the middlebrow reader, or the lowbrow reader seeking middlebrow status. Adler's suggestion that the middlebrow lay somewhere between the illiterate and the expert carried with it the broad liberal humanist notion that the classics were within the grasp of all who made the decision to accept them. This faith in humanity complemented Adler's interest in adult education which in turn stemmed from his years at Columbia University where he and his colleagues taught the great books curriculum to the non-university going public at Cooper Union. It was his stated belief that "education does not stop with schooling."[23] At the same time, however, Adler expressed a healthy skepticism for the self-help techniques which dominated the first half of the twentieth-century. Adler was convinced that the methods proposed by Eliot with the *Harvard Classics* series — excerpting long texts, extensive cross- referencing and guided

reading — were fruitless and that it was not possible to learn to read the classics in just fifteen minutes each day.[24]

Skepticism of the self-help approach led Adler to develop a more stringent method of instruction in his own work. Focussed primarily on philosophy, not the novel, the goal of *How To Read a Book* was the establishment and investigation of a number of rules which Adler had developed in regards to the proper ways to approach a text. Significantly, Adler divided reading into an active versus a passive activity. Adler placed an almost total emphasis on the former and further subdivided that category into reading for information and reading for understanding. If one read for information there was an absence of challenge, a general familiarity with what will be presented and in what manner, as in reading a newspaper. Reading for understanding, on the other hand, was a more complex and meaningful experience. When reading for understanding the reader was challenged to rise to the level of the text — presumed to be above the reader's intellectual means — and to labour to excise meaning from the work.[25] This intellectual labour was itself accomplished by three levels of distinct reading: structural, interpretative and critical. In turn each of these levels had its own rules to follow in order to maximize understanding of the arguments being put forward by the text.[26] The benefit of *How To Read a Book*, then, was accrued by mastering the rules which Adler laid down, a scientific and quantifiable means of reading which would, it was assumed by Adler, lead to a greater good not only for the individual but, in its accumulative possibility, humanity as a whole. Yet, as Rubin has perceptively noted, a problem occurred in Adler's approach in that the "system countermanded the genteel emphasis on aesthetics by collapsing in the face of art."[27] Although he tried to extrapolate his rules pertaining to the reading of non-fiction to the art of fiction, the attempt was largely unsuccessful. Adler was forced to argue, for instance, that in looking at a novel it was imperative not to seek a message nor an argument nor, ultimately, truth. Instead the

reader was left to classify unities and the construction of characters, narratives and fictive worlds.[28] In the end, therefore, Adler could recommend little to his readers who wished to explore fiction, a position which severely undercut his own utility for the aspiring middlebrow reader.

Where Adler remained most firmly in accord with the genteel critics was in his insistence on a great books approach. Adler dwelled for only one page on the rules for reading purely informative literature, suggesting simply that the two most important questions must be: "Is it true?" and "What of it?"[29] Foremost in the middlebrow pedagogy was general philosophy and the tradition of great essayists. Adler traced the teaching of the classics back to ancient Rome in an effort to illustrate that the history of human development was linked to the idea of a liberal education. There were a number of elements which contributed to the decision of whether or not a text could truly be considered a classic. Set against his functionalist program were the more problematic questions of morality, tone and influence. Adler maintained that classics were those works which elevated the human spirit or deepen humanity; texts which were written in a popular or generalized style and not for a specialized audience of experts; texts which addressed themselves towards solving the persistently unresolved problems of human existence.[30] Books which accomplished these tasks were those which were the most readable because they were the building blocks of a common humanity: "The great books are *not* faded glories. They are *not* dusty remains for scholars to investigate. They are *not* a record of dead civilizations. *They are rather the most potent civilizing forces in the world today.*"[31]

The ultimate goal of the liberal education was not, therefore, merely the protection of the classics and the promulgation of a belief in those texts for their own sake. Writing at the height of European fascism, Adler believed that the role of the liberal education was the maintenance of a freer world. Adler repeatedly claimed that the task of active reading

entailed inserting oneself into a conversation in which the great books engaged amongst themselves. This overture to the etiquette of social performance may have helped Adler to market his book to the top of the best-seller lists, but it also detracted from his larger emphasis on the role of the free mind in a free society. Adler allowed for no derogation from the minutiae of his rules which guided the reader through the text. The narrowness of Adler's conception of the proper ways in which a text could be encountered sat in relative disharmony with his larger comments on the role of learning in opposition to indoctrination (which he viewed as resulting from exposure to the mass media).[32] While Adler maintained that reading was only a means to an end — that end being a happier life and a freer society — his own over-reliance on rules in order to enforce a notion of a correct reading technique which privileged his own role as expert and guardian of high culture suggested to the contrary a very anti-democratic spirit.

The Uses of Literacy

The defenders of the genteel tradition of American reading can be viewed as the strongest proponents of what has been termed the "prisoner phenomenon," or the belief that literacy contributes to the emancipation of the mind.[33] In this way, it could be argued that Adler's insistence on literacy to lead to the development of a free society is rooted in a larger belief system which can be traced back to the nineteenth-century and the emancipatory critics or rationalists. Robert Owen suggested that an accurate investigation of the facts — itself dependent on universal literacy — would usher in a new era of rationality and an age of reason. Similarly, John Stuart Mill claimed that only an intelligent electorate could make justified decisions and that the route to intelligence lay in reading and writing. In Mill's formulation in a free society in which the flow of ideas is unchecked, all ideas will be scrutinized and the truth will triumph over falsehood. The historical trajectory of this

reasoning, Robert Pattison argues, was based upon a fallacy and dominated pedagogical thought up to and including the post-war era. Citing the examples of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union, Pattison indicates that there is ample evidence to question the rationalist assumption. Nazi Germany, for example, was one of the best educated and most literate societies of the twentieth century but few would claim that it achieved great levels of freedom and rationality. At the same time many of the most prosperous nations also have high levels of illiteracy, Saudi Arabia for instance. Clearly there is little historical evidence on which to base a claim that literacy in and of itself leads to industrialization, civil liberties and freedom.[34]

Despite the flawed conception, extending from Mill to Adler, of literacy-as-emancipation, it has proven durable as a theory and is a tenable aspect of a particular and widely accepted ideology which exemplifies dominant American culture. The bias of liberal culture is the conflation of two distinct forms of literacy: the mechanical ability to read and individual awareness of the scope and power of language.[35] The latter is, it should be noted, a highly context-dependent term. Homer, for instance, lacked the basics of mechanical literacy but cannot be seriously termed illiterate, for in his own historical, social and cultural context it is unlikely that there was a more highly skilled practitioner of language. Literacy can be best regarded as a constantly evolving form of technology which presents new challenges and new uses to each age. From this vantage point, the liberal aspiration to high culture is "nostalgia as repression"[36] — or a model of literacy so completely stripped from its proper context that it has long passed from usefulness and has become a detriment to the ongoing process of language development.

The central debate around reading in the mid-twentieth century has been a tension between middlebrow and lowbrow conceptions of leisure in an increasingly specialized and industrialized world and the highbrow anxiety that the industrial world was gradually

eroding the values upon which, it was believed, civilization was based. At its core the debate swung around two differing conceptions of the utility of language: the functional view which held that literacy was practical for its economic benefits but not the single dominant force in the binding together of civilizations; and the liberal humanist view that literacy was the central moral and aesthetic tool which humanity used to build upon the past and move forward into the future. The middlebrow is the most important complication in this debate. Oppositions between high and low cultures, like distinctions between economic classes, have historically been maintained through great effort. The middlebrow presented itself, from the vantage point of the cultural guardians, as a new challenge to be overcome in an effort to maintain status as cultural leaders in order to justify their own economic position. The middlebrow was a potentially corrosive force threatening to strip away the power of the canon and, by extension, the power of the class which had come to rely upon the canon for its own sense of class identity. By examining the particular construction of taste in a single era it is possible to demonstrate precisely how these ideological anxieties are played out as strategies of diminishment and infantalization upon the perceived lesser classes. *The Reader's Digest* presented an example of a magazine which sought to bring down high culture to the middlebrow reader. *Classics Illustrated*, rooted as they are in the low culture of comics, illustrate an example of an attempt to rise above the low no further than the middle. This aspiration to middlebrow rather than highbrow taste has been historically problematic for the guardians of culture. As the example of *Classics Illustrated* will suggest, in the eyes of the highbrow these minimal aspirations had to be contained and the most efficient strategies were the derogation of the text and the humiliation of the reader.

The Comic Book in America

Comics are, as Martin Barker has observed, unique amongst all media in that the very name of the form has been widely understood as implying their content.[37] Almost universally regarded as an immature form — a bastard child of the respected parents, literature and visual art — comics have been historically derogated as nothing more than kids' stuff. Gilbert Seldes, one of the earliest cultural critics to rise to the defence of comics, referred to comic strips in 1924 as the most despised and — with the exception of film — most popular of the "seven lively arts." Seldes was correct when he indicated that comics were regarded in self-appointed serious circles as a "symptom of crass vulgarity, of dulness, and ... of defeated and inhibited lives."[38] Yet even Seldes lost his faith in comics as the twentieth-century progressed. In 1957, the revised edition of *The Seven Lively Arts* suggested that, in regards to comics, it as if the author had grown blind, for he could no longer find any example of the form worth his attention.[39] In order to understand Seldes' reservations thirty-three years after his original praise it is necessary to turn to an examination of both the history of the medium and to the discourses which surrounded its changing moral and aesthetic status in order to suggest reasons for the ongoing neglect of comics as a serious mode of communication.

A Brief History of the Comics

By 1950 virtually every daily American newspaper included a comic strip section. At the same time it was estimated that seventy million readers consumed comic magazines every month and one hundred and fifty titles accumulated combined sales of more than twenty million copies per month, outpacing the nation's leading non-illustrated periodical, *The Reader's Digest*, by a nearly three-to-one margin. As a form of communication the

comic book is a relatively new phenomenon. The first book published in what is now considered to be the standardized comic format was the 1933 Proctor and Gamble give-away item, *Funnies on Parade*. In May 1934, the first American commercial comic book, *Famous Funnies*, was released and generated significant sales. Both of these books were repackaged collections of material which had previously appeared in newspapers, but within a year publishers would come to the realization that there existed a potential market for original material in the comic book form. *New Fun*, the first American comic book which contained all original material was launched in 1935, featuring exclusively humorous material. *Detective Comics*, which debuted in 1937, established that comics might dedicate themselves to a single protagonist; a belief which was bolstered in 1938 with the breakthrough success of *Action Comics*, the periodical which still features the adventures of Superman.[40] During the war years, superheroes dominated the medium and the characters of the day were recruited to the Allied cause, often finding themselves in Europe fighting fascism on the battlefield. In the immediate post-war years, however, the dominant position of the superhero was severely eroded. A number of characters lost their own books, or were reduced to bit players. What filled the gap was a rapid expansion into new genres: the funny-animal comics which were often based on characters created by the Warner and Disney animation studios, romance, science-fiction, the western and, most notoriously, horror and crime comics.

The expansion of the market for comic books was greater than publishers could maintain. Though reliable figures on the circulation of comics in the post-war era are largely absent — in large measure because many publishers did not contribute circulation figures to the *Ayers Directory of Periodicals* and *Standard Rate and Data Service*, the two primary periodical accounting organizations — estimations have been made. Patrick Parsons has estimated that 3.7 million comics were sold in the United States in each month in 1942. That

number had grown to a peak of 59.8 million comics per month by 1952.[41] In 1954, *Publisher's Weekly* estimated the market for comics at more than one-hundred million dollars per year, which would place annual sales by copy above the billion mark. It estimated that far greater amounts were going toward comic books than was spent nationally on text books in elementary and secondary schools and that the comics industry had gross revenues which were four times the total purchasing power of the nation's public libraries.[42] This revelation was met with considerable concern by child development psychologists, some of whom became concerned with the possible effects of such a proliferation of new literature for children.

Yet all contemporary studies of the comic book's rapid rise to national prominence indicate that children were not the exclusive consumers of comic books in the post-war era. A 1948 survey of reading habits in New Orleans indicated that between one quarter and one third of all comic books bought in that city were purchased by adults for their own entertainment.[43] A survey of men in training camps during the war indicated that fifty-seven percent of all soldiers read comics at least occasionally. That same survey revealed that forty-one percent of adult males and twenty-eight percent of the adult female population were regular comic book readers. Additionally, twenty-five percent of high school graduates and sixteen percent of college graduates could be counted amongst the readers of comic books.[44] Despite these numbers, comics were almost universally seen in the post-war years as children's literature. National surveys seemed to support this proposition when they revealed that up to seventy-five percent of school-aged children read between five and sixty comics each month.[45] While many commentators publicly worried about an adult culture in which so many citizens would opt to read what the critics considered children's stories rather than more substantial literature, it was the children's audience which generated the most demonstrable concern. The war had shifted the values of the American family and

changes to American juvenile crime legislation created a seemingly vast increase in delinquency.[46] Something had changed on the home-front during the war and sent the nation's morals into a tailspin. That something, critics decided, was comic books.

Comics and Fascism

One of the earliest proponents of the theory that comics reading is a threat to democracy was Gershom Legman whose 1949 book, *Love and Death — A Study in Censorship*, postulated that comic books were a threat to mental health because they channelled sublimated sexual desires into aggressive reading. Legman argued that the root cause of increasing levels of juvenile crime lay not in the inspiration to be found in comics, but rather in the frustrations of twentieth-century life "that make necessary our diet of murders" and which "cannot be resolved within the framework of our profit economy and anti-sexual morality." The key to Legman's critique of comics lay in the nature of identification as he defined it. Legman suggested that because love was regarded as unwholesome and revolution unhealthy, "we dream of violence, of death."[47] Comics, being no real solution for these problems, became addictive. Legman believed that this was why the comic book industry grew as quickly as it did.[48] The result, suggested Legman, was a culture of violence addicts in which Superman stood as the perfect fascist, channelling sublimated desires by beating up criminals who have "Jewish noses." Legman's proposed solution was a culture more — not less — exposed to actual sexual activity. Indebted to Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich, Legman developed the first sustained criticism of the comics as a mode of communicating anti-democratic social values, but he was far from the last.

Published in 1954, Geoffrey Wagner's *Parade of Pleasure* presented a critique of comics which shared similarities with Legman's work but approaching the subject from a

radically different viewpoint. Wagner brought a right-wing highbrow standpoint to the subject of comics. The primary cause for concern, wrote Wagner, was that comics were a leading forum for American anti-intellectualism, particularly superhero comics in which the lead characters were musclemen who "hate brains."[49] For Wagner this attitude approached fascism. By presenting a picture which was anti-intellectual, anti-law, anti-government and pro-individual action he felt that comic books indoctrinated youth with a fascist attitude. The worst offender was, again, Superman, whom he analysed by comparing comments made about the character to quotations from *Mein Kampf*. Wagner regarded comics not as merely embodying an attitude of anti-intellectualism, but rather as exemplifying a fascist political program against intellectuals. Additionally, Wagner regarded comics as an affront to democracy, arguing that publishers "sanctify the production of their nauseous pap by that slogan they have so shamefully disgraced — 'In the name of the People'."[50] Although he approached comics from a radically different ideological position than did Legman — who wrote for the *Daily Worker* — Wagner's position illustrated the degree to which mass culture could be read to similar conclusions through entirely different strategies. In the mass culture debate of the 1950s all roads which passed through comics led towards totalitarianism.

Paging Dr. Wertham

The most vocal and consistent critic of comic books at mid-century was Dr. Frederic Wertham, a liberal psychologist who specialized in dealing with problem children. The one-time director of Bellevue, in the post-war years Wertham ran the LaFargue Clinic in Harlem, which was dedicated to lending psycho-analysis to social reform movements. During his time in Harlem Wertham became convinced that racism and segregation were the leading causes of mental unease among his black patients. This discovery led Wertham to a

belief in the need to move away from the micro-dynamic factors of psycho-analysis towards a macro-dynamic exploration of psychology which explored a patient's social relations; in other words, social psychology. Having adopted a new theory relating the power of culture as an external operating force on the personality, Wertham moved to the conclusion that children were being "brain-washed" by culture. Having observed that many of his young patients read more comics than saw movies or read books, Wertham leapt to the conclusion that comics were a causal agent in childhood behavioural disorders.[51] Because comics, at that time, were among the least-regulated media in the United States Wertham took up the banner of reform as a personal crusade.

It is ironic that Wertham, one of the twentieth-century's greatest critics of mass culture, gained national prominence by his ability to use that culture to his own ends. Wertham's first salvo in the war on comics was a *Saturday Review of Literature* article entitled "The Comics... Very Funny!." In itself, the article might have had little impact were it not for the keen eyes of the editors at *The Reader's Digest* who reproduced his article in its entirety later that same year. Wertham's commentary was so successful that he was to publish four additional critiques of comics in 1948 alone.[52] Over the course of the next six years, Wertham rehearsed, researched and refined his arguments. By the time he released his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham was convinced that so-called crime comics were among the leading factors contributing to juvenile delinquency and that they were the primary cause of declining literary standards.

In the book's chapter dealing with the effect of comics on literacy, "Retooling for Illiteracy," Wertham argued that "comic books are death on reading."[53] For Wertham the problem of comics rested with the medium itself, regardless of the content:

> The comic-book format, with its handled balloons scattered over the page, with its emphasis on pictures and their continuity, with its arrows directing

> the eyes from right to left or even up and down, with its many inarticulate words-that-are- not-words, interferes with learning proper reading habits.[54]

According to Wertham, comic books were "the greatest anti-educational influence that man's greed has ever concocted."[55] The entire basis of Wertham's critique of comics as a detriment to the acquisition of proper reading skills was founded upon the idea that the medium was inherently problematic and consequently irretrievable for a literate culture. Like that other liberal humanist Mortimer Adler, Wertham argued that "the dawn of civilization was marked by the invention of writing"[56] and that any interference in the development of proper reading ability would necessarily result in social maladjustment.

Wertham's argument began from the premise that reading was not an isolated function of the brain but was in actuality a highly complex performative act. This performance could be disrupted by several factors related to the synthesis of words and images in the comic book form. In the first instance, comics handicapped vocabulary because of their emphasis on the visual element instead of the proper word. Irregular bits of printing in comics panels disrupted the acquisition of a normal left-to-right reading pattern. The pictures themselves discouraged reading because many people who had reading disabilities could grasp the narrative of a comic book exclusively through the visual elements. Wertham further argued that the poor quality paper used to print comics at mid-century led to the development of eyestrain for many comics readers.[57] All of this led Wertham to the conclusion that, despite the fact that reading disorders existed before comics, comics were a major contributing factor to the contemporary problem. Wertham further concluded that there was a "relatively high correlation between delinquency and reading disorders; that is to say, a disproportionate number of poor or non-readers become delinquent, and a disproportionate number of delinquents have pronounced reading disorders."[58] The mass production of comic books was viewed by Wertham as the heart of

the problem because they enjoyed an unfair advantage against "good inexpensive children's books."[59] In reifying the traditional distinction between high and low culture in its new incarnation of books against comics, Wertham, like the genteel critics promoting the great books approach to literature, sought nothing less than the protection of children of all classes, suggesting that illiteracy and poor aesthetic choices could ensnare even children from "well-to-do families."[60] Wertham's role in the history of American comics may be ironically viewed as a popularizer of highbrow anxieties. While he contributed few new ideas to the debate surrounding mass culture, he was able to bring those ideas which he did have to a mass audience through popular magazines and a best-selling middlebrow book. Furthermore he stands as the single most influential commentator on comics, the ultimate lowbrow text, to this point in their history.

Spreading the Word

The general tenor of non-expert commentary on comics as a medium at mid-century was, to be generous, not favourable. *The Wilson Library Bulletin* wrote that comics were "insufferably rotten,"[61] "appalling" and described them as a "plague" which has swept the nation.[62] John Mason Brown wrote of comics: "I resent the way they get along with the poorest form of writing. I hate their lack of both style and ethics. I hate their appeal to illiteracy, and their bad grammar. I loathe their tiresome toughness, their cheap thrills, their imbecilic laughter."[63] Margaret Brady wrote that "excessive comic books (sic) reading may be a symptom of disturbance."

Of course not all commentators on the medium were detractors. Several lines of defence were established for comics despite the fact that published opinion ran heavily against the medium. One such line of argument was that comic books and strips formed the basis for a universal culture, a status which was derived from their reliance on both words

and images. William Marston, a psychologist and the original writer of the *Wonder Woman* series for DC Comics, argued that "it is the form of comics-story telling, 'artistic' or not, that constitutes the crucial factor in putting over their universal appeal."[65] Yet at the same time that very feature was utilized precisely as an argument to explain why comics failed to meet basic standards for qualification as literature: "There is no effort whatsoever in the reading of comic books. It is quite the reverse. Because every sentence is short, the books demand no concentration. Because every act is pictured, they demand no imagination"[66] This was a re-placement of the identical argument which was used by Canby to privilege books over magazines, namely duration of reading and the investment of time which was held to be a basic requirement for literature.

Many of the arguments which were marshalled against popular magazines were also found in the debate surrounding comics. In the same way that Greenberg argued that it is unlikely that an audience brought up on kitsch will adopt the avant-garde, so too it was asserted that the move from comics to real books was unlikely. While Williams and Wilson may have suggested in *The Publisher's Weekly* that "the despised comic has its uses and its virtues, if only in pointing the way to more vital books for those millions who persistently ignore so-called 'better' literature,"[67] a more common argument was that of Elinor Saltus who suggests that "the short, episodic nature of the text accompanying the pictures" means that "only limited ideas can be expressed in that way ... It cannot lead to skill in reading thoroughly well-written material."[68] It was generally held that the diminishment of the role which text plays in comics as a result of the number of images, what Brown termed substituting "bad drawing for good description,"[69] fundamentally "robs the child of imaginative possibilities."[70] Thus the discourses surrounding comic books at mid-century postulated that it was the form of comics, the medium itself, which constituted a problem for literary standards, even before the notion of content had even entered into the discussion.

The anti-comic mood was not, of course, lost on the publishers themselves. Phil Keenan, president of the American Comic Magazine Publishers, commented "...we are on trial in the court of public opinion. Our defence is this code of minimum editorial standards designed to result in the production of comic magazines which are interesting, exciting, dramatic — and clean!"[71] The code to which Keenan referred did not last long, however. Dissension amongst publishers caused the fracture of the ACMP and, by 1949, the code which it had adopted no longer held any force. At the same time a number of local groups had begun lobbying for ordinances which would restrict the sale of comics to minors and the Safeway food store chain had bowed to public pressure by agreeing to no longer stock comic books. The anti-comics crusaders were given a tremendous boost in 1950 when, at the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover adopted a rhetoric indicating that comics posed a threat to the nation:

> A comic book which is replete with the lurid and macabre; which places the criminal in a unique position by making him a hero; which makes lawlessness attractive; which ridicules decency and honesty' which leaves the impression that graft and corruption are necessary evils of American life; which depicts the life of the criminal as exciting and glamourous many influence the susceptible boy or girl who already possesses anti-social tendencies.[72]

In the face of an overwhelmingly bad public image, declining distribution options and the possibility — however remote — of government intervention, the Comics Magazine Association of America was founded in 1954. On September 16 of that year, New York Magistrate Charles Murphy was appointed as head of the CMAA in order to administer a voluntary plan intended to eliminate crime, horror, and terror comics. Twenty-four of America's twenty-seven publishers joined the organization. Of the three who did not, the first, Dell, had its own pre-existing code which was more stringent than that of the CMAA; the second, EC Comics, joined and then withdrew in protest of decisions which they considered arbitrary and beyond the scope of the code; the third, The Gilberton

Corporation, was something of a special case. As the publishers of the self-proclaimed uplifting *Classics Illustrated* line of comics, they were caught up in a competing series of discourses and negotiated their way through the immediate post-War era in a manner very different from the rest of the publishers.

Classics Illustrated and the Comic Book Industry

It is an interesting irony that the publisher which received the greatest public approbation in the anti-comics crusade of the 1950s, EC Comics, began in the 1940s as a publisher of literary and classic titles. It was only when sales of Educational Comics began to flag that publisher Bill Gaines changed the name of his company to Entertaining Comics and began to publish horror, war and science-fiction material.[73] Gaines, as the leading publisher of the type of comic books most clearly under attack, became a spokesman for the entire industry, suggesting that his opponents were "red dupes." Yet Gaines' efforts proved largely unsuccessful and by 1955 his publishing line was reduced to a single title — *Mad Magazine*, which continues to be profitable to this day.

The only other publisher of literary comics at the time was the Gilberton Corporation. In direct contrast to their competition, Gilberton opted not to challenge public criticisms of comics by resorting to anti-communist name-calling, but rather sought to prove to the public-at-large that comics need not be simple fare. Albert Kanter, president of the Gilberton Corporation, attempted to distance his company from the rest of the comic book industry as early as 1950. He told *The New York Times* that his aim in publishing an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was to loosen "the hold of video and Superman on countless youthful minds."[74] Clearly Kanter was attempting to move his company through different waters. Rather than meeting critics of the comics head-on, as Gaines did,

he chose to try and circumnavigate the problem by suggesting that he was all too aware of the alleged problems posed by his competitors and was taking steps to remedy the situation

A Brief History of Classics Illustrated

Albert Kanter was born in Russia in 1897, emigrated to the United States in 1904 to escape the pogroms and was naturalized in 1907. He never finished high school and worked as a travelling salesman from the age of sixteen. After investing heavily in real estate, Kanter was wiped out in the stock market crash of 1929 when land values dropped precipitously. Moving to New York to take a job in a family business, Kanter became a publisher's rep associated with the Elliot Publishing Company, in charge of selling surplus books. As legend has it Kanter became interested in publishing educational comics when he realized that his own children preferred comics to the literature which he personally favoured. In 1940 he, along with two partners, decided to publish the first issue of *Classic Comics*, a sixty-four page adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, drawn by Malcolm Kildale, which was printed in the fall of 1941. The production cost was $8 000 and a quarter of a million copies were distributed. Kanter's revenues tripled his investment and a new line of comics was born.[75]

The *Classics* series was successful enough that by the third issue Kanter felt a need to prepare for possible growth by incorporating his comics line independent of Elliot Publishing. To this end, he bought the warehouse and name of the Gilberton Corporation, a failed chemical company, and changed its charter of incorporation to allow for publishing. The number of pages in each issue of *Classic Comics* was reduced to fifty-six during the paper shortage of the Second World War and then further reduced to forty-eight pages in 1948 where it would remain until 1962.[76] Other notable changes in the series during the 1950s included the publication of the first comic book version of a Shakespearean play,

Julius Caesar, in February 1950; a project which was undertaken with the assistance of the New York University literature department. In 1951, Gilberton became the first American publisher to significantly raise their prices above twelve cents. Although the *Classics* had twice as many pages as their competitors, the price of thirty-five cents — three times the industry standard — priced their comics beyond the budget of most children. The price hike coincided with Gilberton's shift to a single national distributor which replaced the web of regional distributors which they had previously relied on. To justify the price increase in the minds of consumers, Gilberton added painted covers printed on heavy card stock, which helped to distinguish their line from competitors. In 1952, the *Classics* published the first adaptation of a work not in the public domain, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and found that it could in fact produce a profitable comic book even if it had to pay royalties. By 1954 Kanter felt that they were running out of books to adapt and decreased his publishing frequency for new titles to bi-monthly. At the same time, it was recognized that an entire generation had gone by which now had no opportunity to have purchased the titles published in the 1940s. To capitalize on this situation, Gilberton began the process of reprinting its older works for a new generation, a process which was to keep the company financially solvent longer than might otherwise have been possible.[77]

Producing the Classics

At its peak during the 1950s, the Gilberton Corporation operated with twenty editors overseeing the production of its various titles. New titles were selected annually at a meeting of the editors after consensus had been reached amongst the editorial board as to what would be both profitable and worthwhile. Two principles, however, strongly guided the choices of the editors. In the first instance, whenever possible, it was deemed preferable to publish adaptations of works which were in the public domain as that obviated the need

to clear permissions and pay royalties. More importantly, the editors recognized that their comics were being used as supplements — and often replacements — for books which were assigned in the elementary and secondary school system. As a result Gilberton tailored their line whenever possible to match known curricula of American public schools. Gilberton justified this process by indicating to teachers and other educational professionals that "the taste for literature and fine art must be cultivated in a child slowly," that forcing a child to read "heavy" material before he or she was ready for the challenge would simply cultivate a dislike for reading rather than an appreciation for it.[78]

Once selected, the actual production of the comic books was performed on a freelance basis. From 1945 until 1955 this work was conducted primarily by the Jerry Iger Studio in New York. Iger is best remembered in the history of the American comic book as "an indefatigable discoverer of new comic talent"[79] Amongst Iger's most notable discoveries were Jack Kirby and Will Eisner, two of the most respected comics art stylists of the mid-century era. Iger's contribution to the *Classics* series was that a greater space for specialization and flexibility in the production of the titles. Iger employed respected comics artists — including Robert Webb, Alex Blum and Henry Kiefer — and he was able to assign adaptations to artists based on their particular strengths and skills, insuring a higher quality of illustration than might otherwise have been expected. Despite the fact that Classics paid lower than average page rate of thirty dollars, the company was regarded as a reliable source of income and the titles were in demand amongst artists because they required less work on each page than many other comics — averaging only four panels per page as opposed to the industry norm of nine — and more pages were included in each issue which meant larger overall incomes.[80] Consequently the *Classics* line was able to attract enough talented artists so that both prospered in an era of overall industry decline.

The Impact of Classics Illustrated

Announcing the decision of the Gilberton Corporation to move into adaptations of Shakespeare in 1950, *The New York Times* indicated that the *Classics* line had sold over two-hundred million comics in its ten years of publishing and that twenty-five thousand American schools incorporated *Classics Illustrated* into their curricula in some form.[81] One important reason for the overwhelming success of the *Classics* series was that the individual comics were not cover dated. While most unsold comics were returned to publishers after their cover date had passed, this was not the case with the *Classics* series which, as Kanter repeatedly pointed out to retailers, had a potentially indefinite shelf-life.[82] Additionally the *Classics*, not unlike *The Reader's Digest* condensed book club, appealed to a significant number of adult consumers. The thirty-five cent price meant that the *Classics* required an adult audience, either as readers themselves, or, at the least, as intermediate purchasers. Gilberton expanded their adult readership during the Second World War when it shipped forty million copies of their comics overseas to soldiers via the Red Cross. This initial attempt at international distribution snow-balled and, by 1954, Gilberton was producing the *Classics* series in nineteen foreign editions. Sales of *Classics Illustrated* did not begin to seriously decline until 1959 when the Post Office stripped Gilberton of it second-class mail rate because they decided that the *Classics* series did not qualify as a periodical. This decision severely curtailed the subscriber base for the line and began a downward sales spiral which ultimately took its toll in 1962 when Gilberton published its one hundred and sixty-second — and final — adaptation, *Faust*. From this point onward Gilberton would release only reprinted material until the company ceased publications entirely in 1972. A dominant comic book publisher of the mid-century era, Gilberton found itself unable to remain competitive within the changing structures of American comic book distribution of the 1960s and a comic book culture which had been severely impacted by television.

Classics Illustrated and the Middlebrow Problem

In 1947, the Gilberton Corporation changed the name of their comic book line from *Classic Comics* to *Classics Illustrated*. It was an effort to break the comic book connotation which, Kanter felt, hampered the acceptance of his line as true literature. Kanter believed that he was not selling comics but rather "illustrated versions of the masterpieces."[83] Adler, of course, could have more strongly disagreed, arguing as he did that the best books "cannot be condensed without loss."[84] The loss of which Adler wrote was textual integrity. Condensations or abridgments, Adler suggested, fundamentally change the nature of the text, turning them into new texts. This is precisely what Joseph Witek suggests when he wrote:

> Always queer hybrids of the popular and the highbrow, the *Classics Illustrated* comics seemed at times to be pretentious poor relations in the library and stodgy dowager queens on the newsstands. The faint whiff of absurdity clings to the roots of their paradoxical enterprise. .... They expressed their loyalty finally to the canonical prose text of the high culture, and the carefully researched and scrupulously presented products of the Gilberton Company cannot disguise at last that their essential endeavour is to make themselves obsolete.[85]

Though he does not name it as such, what Witek describes is an historical process of cultural and social aspiration, a longing to rise from lowbrow to middlebrow status by using the culture of the highbrow. This is precisely the type of move which the guardians of high culture in mid-century particularly dreaded.

Writing in Classics Illustrated

Classics Illustrated differentiated themselves from other comics in one important fashion, they never ran ads. Spaces in the comics which was not filled by the actual story were packed with informational filler: opera librettos, educational articles, biographies and

historical stories.[86] Kanter claimed that it was important that the *Classics* series not be thought of as a comic, as that would be doing an injustice to the texts which they presented.

The most comprehensive study of the *Classics* in their own era was performed by Robert Emans and published *The Elementary School Journal* in 1960, building on a study of dialogue in comics published by Robert Thorndike in 1941.[87] Thorndike had argued that a child reading one comic book each month would learn as many new words as would be found in a fourth- or fifth-grade reader. Emans attempted to take these findings one step further by performing a scientific study using *Classics Illustrated*. What Emans found was that there was negligible differences in the dialogue used in the original text and in the comic. The primary change, Emans noted, was that the comic often broke down longer sentences into shorter ones. Emans did discover a number of plot reductions in the comic book versions which he studied, but no omissions of major plot details.[88] Further, Emans noted that up to one third of all the dialogue in the comic was actual quotations from the source material. A similar study by R. Baird Schuman determined that the brevity of the *Classics* versions was actually a strength, particularly because they often removed "rambling descriptive passages" and substituted illustrations.[89] If textual faithfulness to the original was a goal of the *Classics* series, therefore, the *Classics* had to be considered at least moderately successful in replicating the source texts.

The Visual Aesthetics of Classics Illustrated

Gilberton's fact-based and well- researched historical works were regarded by many in the post-War era to be a highpoint of the comics form. Some illustrations met high enough standards that they were excerpted for use in text books,[90] a testament to the success of Kanter at divorcing his line of adaptations from the general perception of comics. One method which was used to effect this sleight-of-hand was the stolid pacing of the

comics themselves. Witek describes the visual tone of restraint which *Classics Illustrated* exemplified in the post-War era: "the verbal rhythm of the captions is so measured as to be monotonous, the panels, though well composed, are static, and the rendering of the figures is a bit stiff."[91] This style complemented the change in the covers from line drawings to full paints that accompanied the jump in price. *Classics Illustrated*, as serious comics, defined prestige in the industry. While not visually dull they never took risks and positioned themselves stolidly in terms in respectability while their contemporaries explored the aesthetics of the lurid.

The pictorial stiffness of the *Classics Illustrated* comics was intensified by the visual coding of the textual elements within each comic. Unusual amongst comics of the day, each panel generally had an expository narration caption which subordinated the visual elements of the comics to the textual. This subordination was enhanced by the odd design of the word balloons which were ruled in geometric patterns with only a minimum of rounding at the corners and to draw attention to the words. The lettering also highlighted the text. Unlike the majority of comics on the market, *Classics Illustrated* comics utilised stencilled lettering (called Leroy lettering) which originated in engineering drafting. In comics, lettering is an aesthetic element and most letterers have distinctive styles or voices. By rendering all of the voices in the comics uniform a dry monotone effect is created. Will Eisner has suggested that the cold type Leroy lettering lent the comics an inherent authority.[92] All of the elements of the *Classics Illustrated* comics, therefore, worked towards establishing a distinction between the literary adaptations and the other comics on the market. Drawing directly on the narratives and dialogue of respected books, ignoring the temptations of lurid colouring and jarring visuals, even clarifying the lettering which Wertham had complained caused eye strain amongst children. The *Classics* line was the picture of respectability in the comics industry. *Classics Illustrated* won five Thomas Edison awards — established in 1955 to

encourage comics publishers to help in the battle against juvenile delinquency — for their contributions to "the intellectual growth of youngsters and ... this nation's traditions."[93] As the pillar of the comics community, the *Classics*, Kanter may have thought, must have been beyond reproach. Yet this simply was not the case.

Classics Illustrated *as a Middlebrow Text*

Asked to comment on the state of comics in 1951, Fritz Kredel, the illustrator of a number of books featuring both Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales, suggested: "About 75 per cent of the comics deal with horror, murder, and superhuman nonsense. The remaining 25 per cent spoil good literature."[94] Another illustrator, Bob Kuhn, remarked that he felt "particularly strongly about the comic versions of the great classics. Unless they act as an inducement to reading the original, they serve no good purpose whatsoever."[95] Wertham echoed this sentiment three years later in *Seduction of the Innocent* when he wrote of *Classics Illustrated*: "what the comic books of 'classics' and 'famous authors' do shows our disregard for literature or for children or for both."[96] *Classics Illustrated*, much as Kanter may have wished to believe otherwise, were not above criticism. Many of the highbrow critics of the magazine weighed in equally as strongly against this form of comics, perceiving the *Classics* as a threat to the role of the canon. The lowbrow comics had taken a tentative step towards the middle, now it was time for the highbrows to throw them back.

Not surprisingly, many of the discourses employed in the public discussions of *The Reader's Digest* found similar outlet in treatments of *Classics Illustrated*. In 1950, John Mason Brown of *The Saturday Review of Literature* wrote that The Gilberton Company had "peddled what was not even a substitute and pretended it was an equivalent."[97] Amongst the charges made against the comic book version of *MacBeth*, the ostensible subject of Brown's review, first and foremost was the charge of reductionism. Brown

argued that it was an error to believe that Shakespeare could be reduced to a narrative structure alone. It was a grave misunderstanding, Brown insisted, to feel that one could sell a version of *MacBeth* which was primarily focused on the narrative line:

> Certainly no one can be hurt by knowing the story of *MacBeth*. Yet just as surely as no one can pretend to know *MacBeth* who knows only its story and has encountered it in such a form. This is the glaring delusion to which [the publisher] has surrendered in the interests of what they apparently believe, and would have their readers, young and old believe, is "culture".[98]

Evident here is a fixation on the notion that it was primarily the problems with the comic book form which render this version of *MacBeth* unworthy of the appellation "culture". This sentiment was argued more forcefully by *The Wisconsin Library Bulletin* when it wrote that "these [comics] hold to the comic style else they 'would defeat their purpose'. So, obviously, their purpose is that of comics rather than that of books."[99] For both Brown and the *Library Bulletin* the primary sin committed by *Classics Illustrated* was that they have "confused one medium with another."[100] By substituting illustrations for lengthy prose passages, *MacBeth* had been stripped of its drama: "the colours are hideous. The human figures are empty parodies of what the parts demand."[101] Yet, more importantly, by adapting the text for "EASY and ENJOYABLE Reading," as the cover proclaimed, *Classics Illustrated* had robbed "a sublime poet of his poetry and a supreme dramatist of the form at which he excelled," a development which Brown concluded was "mayhem plus murder in the first degree."[102]

The definitive critique of *Classics Illustrated*, and the mediocrity of the mass culture literary text in relation to high culture, was provided by poet and essayist Delmore Schwartz in his 1952 essay "Masterpieces as Cartoons." Schwartz immediately adopted the standard high/low paradigm by establishing an opposition between the classics and the adaptations of those works. While Schwartz elaborated on many of the themes similarly addressed by Wertham and Brown, comics were set apart from books because they required "no

exertion" to read; comics disregarded all serious content and subject matter.[103] He also advanced those arguments into territories which brought them more concretely in line with writers like Greenberg and MacDonald. Writing on the *Classics Illustrated* adaption of *Crime and Punishment*, Schwartz observed that "the miracle, or perhaps one should say triumph of Dostoevsky's genius, is that despite all the cuts and mutilations of the original, there are gleams and glitters throughout the illustrated version of the psychological insight Dostoevsky possessed."[104] Schwartz' attribution of the elements of genius in the adaption to Dostoevsky rather than to the creators is of the comic book is hardly surprising. Indeed the comment seems to be a natural extension of MacDonald's argument that the serious writer will necessarily produce serious writing while the hack writer can only produce hack writing,[105] extended in this instance to account for the vagaries of form. For the comics form remains the primary obstacle to quality in the case of *Classics Illustrated*. Schwartz' argument that the elimination of the blank verse from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fundamentally and irretrievably altered the text and led to the play being read "incorrectly"[106] was indicative of the extent to which his argument presupposed a notion that there were ways of addressing oneself to culture which were fundamentally correct, ways which necessarily excluded the possibility of the incorporation of text and image.

Although much of his essay discussed the problems of *Classics Illustrated* as literary adaptations, Schwartz was equally concerned to estimate something of the way in which these comics were likely to be received. Like many critics of adapted texts, Schwartz argued that the best that could be hoped for from *Classics Illustrated* was that they would lead the reader to a consideration of the actual books. Yet Schwartz rejected this possibility as improbable, arguing to the contrary that the form of comic books was more likely to lead to a development of an unwillingness to consider the texts in their original form:

> If you get used to getting literature with illustrations - "visualized" is the phrase, I think - then you are likely to feel deprived when there are no illustrations and you have to do all the work yourself, depending on the book itself. Moreover, the vice of having visualizing done for you is all too likely to make you unused if not unwilling to read books which have no pictures in them.[107]

Schwartz' argument, however, was not entirely limited to a consideration of the effect of the visual image on literacy. More importantly, his conclusions stemmed from what can best be regarded as a contempt for a middle or lowbrow reading audience: "most readers who come to Faulkner and Joyce by means of pocket books do not know the difference between James M. Cain and James Joyce or Dashiell Hammett and William Faulkner."[108] Schwartz' idea of a non-differentiating audience incapable of remembering the names of authors "no matter how many of their works they read"[109] is striking in the level of disdain which it implied. By moving his discussion of *Classics Illustrated* away from a consideration of the texts themselves and towards an argument about the unsophisticated nature of their reading audience, Schwartz exemplified the value judgments implicit in the criticisms of literary adaptations. What Schwartz made most clear was that the stakes of the debate were not fully about what should be read and how but, rather, turned equally on the question of who should be reading.

A final line of defence for comic books as a medium was suggested as early as 1942 by Josette Frank, chair of the book and radio committee of the Child Study Association, when she explained that comics could be understood as "in line with the folklore of all peoples."[110] Yet even this reasoning was problematic in the eyes of critics of the comics industry. In drawing a distinction between folk culture and Masscult, MacDonald argued: "Folk Art grew mainly from below, an autochthonous product shaped by the people to fit their own needs ... Masscult comes from above."[111] Fiedler pointed out that the "haters of our own popular art love to condescend to the folk,"[112] and indeed it was the idea that folk

art is an authentic expression of the people which formed the basis for the attack on comic. Seemingly echoing MacDonald, Wertham argued that comics were the opposite of folk culture because "they are not poetic, not literary, have no relationship to any art ... They do not express the genuine conflicts and aspirations of the people."[113] This is, of course, the core of the problem for the critics of mass and middlebrow culture. MacDonald argued that folk art was unproblematic in relation to high art because it existed as a parallel to the latter tradition. At the same time, Masscult and Midcult were to be regarded as threatening because they represented, in the first instance, an inauthentic or manufactured cultural tradition and, secondly, they attempted to overcome their status as second-rate items.[114]

Conclusions

Although deriving from strategically different cultural locations, there is a striking similarity in the critical discourses surrounding both *Classics Illustrated* and *The Reader's Digest* at the height of their successes. By displaying an unwillingness to maintain the status of the merely lowbrow, by attempting to disseminate elements of high culture for profit, *Classics Illustrated* became problematic for many critics wishing to maintain firmly differentiated cultural distinctions. However, the crisis which surrounded these two quintessentially middlebrow texts was not a crisis of literary quality, but of class. When Wertham referred to "Classics Mutilated"[115] or Canby unfavourably contrasted magazine reading to book reading[116] what was at stake was not the continuation of American culture, but the assertion of American class positions which were, by the 1950s, perceived to be in retreat. When Fiedler suggested that the adoption of *The Reader's Digest* and *Classics Illustrated* could be a goal of an American middle-class attempting to colonize the high and the low what he fundamentally failed to recognize was the degree to which both of these

titles had, by 1955, become caught up in competing discourses surrounding questions of class and taste; discourses which suggest, if nothing else, the degree to which middlebrow culture was itself very much a site of contestation and appropriation in American culture at mid-century.

How To Win Friends and Influence Shakespeare
Literary Adaptation and Middlebrow Culture

Learning to Adapt

In 1911, critic Stephen Bush argued that the mission of the motion picture industry was to bring to classic literature to the screen. Reaffirming the widely held opinion that film was — and would remain — a communication medium directed solely at working class audiences, Bush saw film as a means of elevating the entirety of the American public:

> After all, the word "classic" has some meaning. It implies the approval of the best people in the most enlightened times. The merits of a classic subject are nonetheless certain because known and appreciated by comparatively few men. It is the business of the moving picture to make them known to all.[1]

This position was probably not widely held beyond Bush however. Certainly film producers felt no great need to educate the populace; for them, the primary business of film was business. In that regard novels — classic or not — were valuable insofar as they were proven properties with built-in audience demand. Concomitantly, it was recognized that the newer and "inferior" medium of film could benefit by borrowing the stature and prestige associated with literature. In this way film became the first of the twentieth-century's great adapters of literature and it is from film criticism that much of the most substantial criticism of that cultural endeavour stems.

Two Theories of Adaptation

The first American critic to seriously address the topic of adapting literature to film was George Bluestone, whose 1957 book *Novels into Film* remained the sole text on the subject until 1975.[2] Bluestone's argument about the relationship of literature to film centred on the differing production bases for the two media. To him film must necessarily differ from literature because the dependence on the moving image, mass audience and

collaborative industrial production was "bound to differ from an art whose limits depend on language, a limited audience and individual creation."[3] Fidelity, as a goal in adaptation, was a lost cause since mutations were inevitable in the translation between media. For Bluestone this posed no particular problem. He suggests that the new filmic text should merely be regarded as a new work entirely, with no greater relation to the original literary version than a painting of an historical event has to the actual event.[4] This recognition, however, was not to indicate that the two texts were of equal value. The creation of the filmic text would always involve the "destruction" of the literary antecedent. A film version of a novel was merely a "paraphrase" of that novel irrespective of the quality of the adaptation.[5] Bluestone concluded by pondering the question of whether or not the cinema could actually be prohibited from literary adaptations, giving up on the idea with the realization that the film industry was "omnivorous" for story material. The best that could be hoped for was a recognition of the metamorphic process which transforms the adaptation into an entirely new text while leaving the original intact for those who would broach it.

The despairing formalism of George Bluestone was rejected in a 1980 article by Dudley Andrew, "The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory".[6] Rather than simply dismissing all adaptations as if there were only one type as a result of the formal differences between the two media, Andrew took a more expansive look at the history of filmic adaptations. In his analysis, cinematic adaptations of literature are characterized by three categories: borrowing, intersection and fidelity of translation.[7] The dominant form of adaptation is borrowing, a process whereby the filmmaker simply uses the original literary text as raw material for the film in an effort to elevate the medium by "demonstrating its participation in a cultural enterprise whose value is outside film."[8] The opposite of borrowing Andrew termed *intersection* in which the integrity of the source material is left completely unassimilated in the adaptation, where the film "records its confrontation with an

Not-So-Great Dane: ***Hamlet* and *Classics Illustrated***

Laurence Levine has pointed out that at one time Shakespeare was the definitive popular playwright in the United States. Tracing the history of Shakespeare in America back as far as 1750, Levine argued that the plays — often with large condensations or in adapted forms — were proven crowd-pleasers. Until the closing of the theatres during the American Revolution, fourteen of his plays were performed as many as 180 times. Levine maintains that originating from this period and extending until the turn of the twentieth-century, Shakespeare was regarded as an integrated part of American popular culture. The theatre performed a widely democratic purpose, bringing together the entire range of American classes to witness a varied selection of entertainment.[15] Testament to this absorption of Shakespeare into the common experience of the times are the great numbers of American parodies of Shakespeare which survive to this day. Some of the humour in Twain's quintessentially American classic *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, was dependent on the audience's ability to recognize — and laugh at — one of the character's inability to correctly quote from Hamlet.[16] Yet this is no longer the case, by the mid-twentieth-century Shakespeare lost his foot-hold in popular entertainment, and was consigned to the status of elite culture, an author to be protected from the mass interest in popular cultures. This historical transformation illustrates a number of the tensions surrounding both the middlebrow text and the middlebrow consumer, including the perceived authority of original texts and the desire to draw a separation between works of an individual artist intended for an elite audience and those mass-produced artefacts providing mere entertainment for anyone and everyone. These concerns converged in what could be the most illustrative example of artistic adaptation, cultural value and class consciousness: the *Classics Illustrated* 1952 comic book adaptation of *Hamlet*.

Utilising Shakespeare

In a 1957 book concerning the organization of community based theatres, John Wray Young indicated that the general public had turned its back on the classics: "Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, the Greeks, and the other masters are hard to sell in the average community situation."[17] Young's commentary is indicative of the degree to which, by the mid-twentieth-century, Shakespeare no longer occupied a place in the popular culture of the United States. As Levine observes:

> [Shakespeare] had become part of "polite" culture — an essential ingredient in a complex we call, significantly, "legitimate" theatre. He had become the possession of the educated portions of society who disseminated his plays for the enlightenment of the average folk who were to swallow him not for their entertainment but for their education.[18]

This development constituted a radical departure from nineteenth-century uses of Shakespeare. In that era, Shakespeare had been regarded as an enjoyable and integrated aspect of American popular entertainment, performed in theatres for all classes and social groups. The transformation of Shakespeare into an elite cultural artifact was a lengthy historical process. Arguments suggesting that Shakespeare was too important to be left to the working class had appeared in the United States as early as the first half of the nineteenth century. The Astor Place Riot of 1849, in which a theatre featuring a production of *MacBeth* with a British actor in the lead role was picketed by thousands of working-class demonstrators for being anti-democratic, illustrates the growing contestation of the place of Shakespeare in American culture. These kinds of explosive confrontations gave way to heated exchanges between critics, artists and journalists throughout the nineteenth-century. By 1884 the debate had taken centre stage in American culture; so much so that Richard Grant White could write about the members of the cult of "Shakespearianism" who formed a new American literary religion dedicated to preserving the "immortal" Shakespeare.[19] These "cultists" argued that Shakespearean dialogue was simply too difficult to be

understood by "untrained minds." The solution, purveyors of elite culture claimed, was to relegate Shakespearean performances to theatres with discrete clienteles in order to protect his writings from "ignorant audiences and overbearing actors."[20]

Though the move to protect Shakespeare from lowbrow audiences was couched largely in rhetorical terms surrounding a change in language use, the primary means of altering the status of Shakespeare was economic. Certainly the dawn of the twentieth-century marked a significant change in the evolution of American language use. The arrival in the United States of millions of non-English speaking immigrants was a contributing factor to the increasing alienation of the lowbrow audience from Shakespeare. The length of Shakespearean productions came to be regarded as increasingly anachronistic in an era in which the lengthy orations which had dominated early nineteenth century cultural life no longer performed an important function. Yet, more important were changes in the institution of the theatre. Between 1860 and 1880 there was a significant decline in romantic idealism and melodrama — genres which easily embraced Shakespearean themes — on the American stage. The new trend, characterized by a lessening of stylistic extremes, foregrounded a different sense of naturalism closely aligned with intellectualism and introspection. Additionally, the shift towards more fully realized set design in the nineteenth-century made the performance of many of Shakespeare's plays — which utilised a fluid sense of space — increasingly difficult. These technical and stylistic changes were indicative of the fact that the notion of the legitimate theatre was changing. A new sense of elitism was being imported from England, where royal honours were bestowed on artists and managers for uplifting the national heritage. It was in England that the division between producing one lengthy narrative drama or a series of short vignettes with music and dance was first attempted in an effort to lure fashionable audiences back into the theatres. The legitimate theatre transported itself to the United States as theatre with aspirations to art, set in

opposition to slapstick and acrobatics. Legitimate theatre, of course, required legitimate theatres, something which most American cities still lacked. Perhaps the most crucial phase of the change in the status of Shakespeare in the late-nineteenth century was the replacement of local theatre troupes by a more organized and professionally respectable travelling theatre circuit which further entrenched the division between high and low in the American theatre. By 1921, two enterprises, the Theatrical Trust and The Syndicate, controlled the bookings for more than 1700 American theatres. These trusts, dominated by producer-booking agents centred in New York, increasingly enforced a distinction between high and low culture, arguing that Shakespeare was too highbrow to turn a profit in theatres which targeted working class audiences and which would be more profitable if they featured vaudeville routines and film.[21] By the beginning of the twentieth-century, therefore, the separation of Shakespeare from the working class was virtually concluded.

In 1905, Dorothy Richardson pleaded for a wider dissemination of great literature but indicated that the "college settlement folk" often forget when dealing with lowbrow audiences that "Shakespeare ... and all the rest of the really true and great literary crew, are infinite bores to everyday people."[22] What is clear in the rapid transformation of the status of Shakespeare within American culture during the nineteenth-century is that the playwright's status is constantly changing, always in flux. Shakespeare was, and is, popular at those moments when his work seemed to fit with larger cultural concerns, or when his work was presented in such a way that it appears not as an intrusion into popular culture, but as an extension of that culture. By the twentieth-century the latter no longer seemed to be the case in the United States.

A Brief History of Hamlet *Criticism*

If the nineteenth-century witnessed the greatest era of popularity for Shakespeare in the United States, the twentieth-century saw the most important rise in commentary on the author. Shakespeare's works had long enjoyed attention by critics, but none more so than *Hamlet* which is perhaps the most analysed play in history. Amongst the authors who have written on *Hamlet*, for instance, are Voltaire, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Goethe, Coleridge and Tolstoy.[23] The nineteenth-century critical tradition sought to address Shakespeare's characters rather than the plays as wholes or as the works of an historical author. Hartley Coleridge, for instance, invited critics to "put Shakespeare out of the question, and consider Hamlet as a real person, a recently deceased acquaintance."[24] Along these lines, the dominant reading of the play in the nineteenth-century was to regard the character as a reflective thinker incapacitated by his intellectual leanings.[25] This view was most significantly challenged by A. C. Bradley in his 1904 book *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Bradley argued, borrowing on the rapid rise of psychology and psycho-analysis, that Hamlet should be diagnosed as suffering from melancholia. This melancholia, coupled with the trauma of the quick remarriage of Gertrude after the death of the king, combined to create a power of thought and an inability to act which gave the play its profundity.[26]

Bradley's assertions, important as they were in modernizing the criticism of *Hamlet*, were widely challenged from a series of positions during the first half of the twentieth-century. A. J. A. Waldcock, for example, rejected the idea that characters have lives outside of the text. Insisting that there are no antecedent events in a work of drama, Waldcock drew exclusively on textual clues to argue that Bradley's insistence that Hamlet himself was a victim was simply an attempt to placate the humane sensibilities of the contemporary audience, who would find certain of Hamlet's actions reprehensible. Waldcock argued, on the contrary, that *Hamlet* was simply a flawed play constructed by

piecing together incompatible historical and literary elements. *Hamlet* was similarly dismissed by critics such as T. S. Eliot who claimed that there was a lack of objective correlative in Hamlet's disgust for his mother,[28] and by L. C. Knights, a disciple of F. R. Leavis, who argued that the role of literature was to lead to self-knowledge and that *Hamlet* failed to aid in this process.[29] The debate wore on, often to ridiculous heights of moralizing and psychologizing the actions and inactions of this fictitious character, eliding his cultural and literary origins. The lack of consensus amongst highbrow Shakespearean critics is illustrative of the split between high and low cultures. The complete lack of critical consensus on the merits of individual works of high culture, in comparison to the more homogeneous nature of middlebrow and lowbrow cultures, was taken as evidence of the worthiness of serious literature because the very fact of a disagreement was taken to indicate complexity and depth within a text. By privileging a particular interpretation of a work, the middlebrow — and particularly the adaptation — was regarded as abhorrent by highbrow critics because the possibility of informed disagreement had been removed in favour of a more direct communication.

A Comic Book Hamlet

Morris Weitz has suggested that it is a fallacy to make one aspect of a cultural product central to its criticism. There are, Weitz argues, no true or false answers to what aspects of a work are important and which are not. Instead, importance is determined not on a terms of a text-by-text basis but, rather, on a critic-by-critic basis. This argument can be easily extended to deal with individual performances of *Hamlet* which would necessarily privilege different aspects of the play depending on a number of factors, both onstage and on paper. Likewise it would be difficult to adequately suggest that the *Classics Illustrated* version of *Hamlet* which was published in 1952 misrepresents the central aspects of the play

as many contemporary critics of literature and pedagogy claimed. Rather it is more relevant to suggest which interpretations and meanings the comic book privileged. The *Classics Illustrated Hamlet* is, to use Andrew's terms, a borrowed text. In attempting to elevate the status of the comic book, as Kanter had suggested was the primary goal, the *Classics* version of the tale attempted to utilise the prestige accrued to *Hamlet* towards elevating the status of their chosen medium.[30] To this end, the *Classics Illustrated Hamlet* is significant not so much for its very existence but for the ways in which it negotiated the discourses surrounding the play at mid-century in order for the adaptation to enter into a "legitimate" cultural space.

The comic book *Hamlet* was published only four years after Laurence Olivier's film version of the play had won the Academy Award for Best Picture. It is not surprising, therefore, that the comic book version draws so heavily on the crossover success of the Olivier film for much of its inspiration. Olivier's film was, as Neil Taylor has pointed out, a major re-working of the play. Billed as "An Essay on Hamlet", more than half of the dialogue was removed from the film in order to keep its running time down to 155 minutes. Olivier's film, for the most part, cut fairly evenly from the play as a whole, reducing eighteen of the twenty scenes by at least a third and the remaining two scenes by at least a quarter. More significantly, three entire scenes from the fourth act and five characters were eliminated for the film version. One of the effects of these cuts was to diminish the roles of the actively decisive characters Claudius, Fortinbras and Laertes and to focus the film more completely on the individual personality of Hamlet.[31] Taylor has suggested that these decisions were influenced by the thoughts of a single critic and disciple of Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones. Olivier had met Jones in 1937 at the urging of Tyrone Guthrie in order to better come to terms with the mental state of Hamlet so that Olivier might more convincingly portray the role on stage in contemporary terms. Jones had argued that the

reason that no consensus about Hamlet's inability to act had yet emerged was because Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex had remained unknown. Hamlet, according to Jones, was unable to commit to killing his uncle because by doing so he would be killing someone who represented his own Oedipal desires — the destruction of Claudius would be like destroying a part of himself.[32] The tendency to view Olivier's Hamlet as a commentary on Oedipal Crisis is strongest in the closet scene wherein the infantile and sexual roles of Hamlet are highlighted as Olivier adopts "the postures of rapist, romantic lover and babe in arms."[33] The success of Olivier's version of the play in reaching a large viewing audience is certainly a central element in the dominant position his version has held in twentieth century readings of the play.

The *Classics Illustrated* version of *Hamlet* shared a similar fixation on the closet scene. Seven of the book's forty-eight pages are taken up in the representation of the events from this scene. Additional emphasis was placed on the scene because the only two-page spread of the comic book occurs in the midst of this scene as the ghost reappears to chide Hamlet for his inaction.[34] By devoting so much space in the comic book to Hamlet's confrontation with Gertrude, a great deal of the text had to be excised. Again, these cuts are similar to the ones made by Olivier. Significantly, both the *Classics Illustrated* version and the Olivier film remove Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the characters who explain the political intrigue in the play; and Fortinbras who provides much of the political tension. Both adaptations do away with the "How all occasions do inform against me..." soliloquy from the fourth scene of the fourth act, Hamlet's most substantial commentary on the political intrigues taking place at Elsinore. The cumulative effect of these excisions is the removal of a social context for the play and the establishment of the other characters as psychological types against which Hamlet's actions may be judged. It is decisions like these which reduced the analysis of the text to little more than a psychologization of the brooding prince.

Gilberton was praised for its decision to include two unabridged soliloquies in the comic book. However, the included text was presented in such a way as to encourage the reader to skip over them. A full quarter of page seven is taken up by a single word balloon containing the "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt...." soliloquy. The "To be or not to be..." speech in which Hamlet contemplates suicide takes up an equally large space on page thirteen — and includes footnotes. By laying out the page in a fashion so clearly at odds with the dominant comic book styles of the times, it appears as if the Gilberton company had included the soliloquies to ward against complaints of misrepresenting the original, while never fully considering the probability that readers, who are presented with an enormous block of text without any corresponding action, would be encouraged to simply skip over the page. Yet the *Classics Illustrated Hamlet* does not privilege text over illustration throughout; quite the contrary. The scenes from the play which are privileged in the comic are those which are closest in spirit to other popular comics of the period. The introduction of the ghost is given five pages in the opening, the ghost's tale of murder is given two pages, the play-within-the-play in which the murder is recounted an additional two, Ophelia's death and funeral five and the sword-fight at the end four. These scenes, with the addition of the closet scene, constitute half the total page count in the comic book. What one is left with, then, in the end, is Hamlet as a man of action. The ghost's warning intended to whet Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose" seems strange given that Hamlet has, in the comic, not stalled at all — he has planned the play, contemplated killing his uncle and actually murdered Polonius all immediately after he originally learned of the murder of his father. In adapting *Hamlet* then, Gilberton chose to accept the interpretation of the play made best known not in the theatre or on bookshelves but on film by Laurence Olivier and then to present that reading of the text in a fashion which further stripped down any complex or mature contemplation of his psychological condition in order to appeal to an

audience accustomed to the conventions of the comic book at mid-century. In the world of adaptation the comic book was the realm of action and adventure. If the reader wanted motivational analysis, it was to the non-fictional self-help guides that one would turn.

Winning Friends, Chopping Paragraphs

In his 1848 treatise on American morality, essayist Alexis de Tocqueville outlined his understanding of the qualities which he felt constituted the American spirit of self-help:

> The inhabitants of the United States experiences all the wants and all the desires to which a high civilization can give rise, but ... he does not find himself part of a society expertly organized to satisfy them; consequently he often has to provide for himself the various things that education and habit have made necessary for him ... In his mind the idea of newness is closely linked with that of improvement. Nowhere does he see any limit placed by nature to human endeavour.[35]

One hundred years later, this thesis would seem entirely accurate. The mass-market paperback revolution which swept through the American publishing industry in 1939 was a tremendous boon for self-help books. According to a preliminary survey of the genre by Steven Starker, there were 3700 books with "How To" in their titles in print in 1982, a gross underestimation of the total given the fact that many of these volumes do not follow this restriction in titling. Regardless, what is evident is the degree to which self-help books have played an important role in the history of American publishing and in the shaping of American culture in the twentieth-century.

Help Yourself

The self-help book in American culture originated in the Puritan era of the seventeenth-century. Puritan leaders of the time developed a number of prescriptive guidelines intended to assist in the conduct of a devout life — a practice which continued

for more than a century. The early nineteenth-century witnessed a continuation of these values presented in increasingly secularized terms. The Jacksonian era saw the rise of the McGuffey readers, named for children's texts written by William H. McGuffey which taught children traditional values such as restraint, moderation and conscience in the pursuit of one's goals. The ideal of the self-made man which President Andrew Jackson had represented in the first half of the nineteenth-century enjoyed even greater reign in the second in the form of Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthiest Americans in history. Carnegie's rags-to-riches story captured the imagination of the popular press and became a focal point in these times of increasing industrialization and urbanization. The number of how-to-succeed books proliferated, promising short cuts to vast wealth.[36] This collision of urbanity and industrialism attained its fullest expression at the turn of the century in the New Thought movement. Drawing inspiration from the work of Phineas Quimby, the New Thought movement helped to popularize psychology and viewed the unconscious as a source of potentially vast untapped power. It peaked by 1910, a time at which more than one hundred magazines preaching New Thought ideals and practices were in publication.[37] While New Thought did not disappear altogether, it was largely shifted out of the mainstream. The end of the First World War and the return of shell-shocked soldiers gave rise to greater emphasis on the practices of traditional psychology. In reaction to both of these earlier tendencies, Dale Carnegie's *How To Win Friends and Influence People* marked the beginning of the next great movement in the history of American self-helpism.

Thus, the quintessential American self-help book draws on a number of legacies. Stemming originally from American Protestantism, the self-help movement evolved over time to reflect a different relationship between the reader and an increasingly secularized urban society. The self-help book, as Starker defines it, addressed itself to an intended audience and to a particular utility.[38] In its most general terms this utility can be best

expressed as the negotiation between the self and others within a community or society. Readers were encouraged to reformulate their own selves in relation to — and in correspondence with — others in order to achieve a more harmonious balance within a larger social order. Wendy Simonds' suggestion that self-help books fundamentally address themselves to an audience which is simultaneously alienated from society and hopeful of alleviating that alienation[39] seems to best describe the audience at mid-century for books such as Carnegie's.

The Problem of Self-Help

Self-help, like others aspects of American middle-brow culture, has been a traditional target for criticism from highbrow critics. Wendy Kaminer, for instance, has suggested that the self- help movement is fundamentally anti-democratic, a charge long associated with the middlebrow:

> The self-help tradition has always been covertly authoritarian and conformist, relying as it does on a mystique of expertise, encouraging people to look outside themselves for standardized instructions on how to be, teaching us that different people with different problems can easily be saved by the same techniques. It is anathema to independent thought.[40]

Kaminer suggests that self-help is overloaded with experts who are not knowledgeable about any particular subject and bogged down in unnecessary jargon used merely to mystify the obvious and serve to confuse the populace. David Rieff, on the other hand, pictures the self-help movement as the height of American vulgarity, suggesting that it is indicative of a larger move in the United States towards the privileging of self-indulgence.[41] Dwight MacDonald, not surprisingly, has nothing positive to say about what he terms "Howtoism". MacDonald's 1954 *New Yorker* essay simply expands his general commentary on Midcult to include self-help books, finding nothing there which would alter his opinion of middlebrow culture: "How to writers are to other writers as frogs are to mammals; their books are not

born, they are spawned. A howtoer with only three to four books to his credit is looked upon as sterile."[42] The complaints about self-help, then, obfuscate and illuminate at the same time complaints about middlebrow culture in general. The books were seen to be nothing more than mass-produced and empty volumes which serve to satisfy the surface demands of a society uninterested in "deep thought" and contribute to overall lessening of literary standards by inculcating the reader with authoritarianism and the disruption of independent thought. What could possibly be gained from a magazine adaptation of a self-help book? In the eyes of the highbrow critics it was a double-degradation of intellectual philosophy and psychology.

Digesting Dale Carnegie

Born in poverty on a Missouri farm in 1888, Dale Carnegie grew to become one of the leading self-help authors in the history of the United States. Carnegie, who changed the spelling of his last name from Carnagey to draw upon associations with the more famous Andrew Carnegie, organized a series of successful lecture series for the YMCA after finding himself unemployed in 1912. He became well known during the 1920s for courses which he offered on public speaking skills and successful business practices. Approached by Simon and Schuster in 1936 to author a book based on his lecture series, Carnegie delivered a popularized version of his 1932 book *Public Speaking and Influencing Men in Business*. Entitled *How To Win and Friends and Influence People*, the book was targeted at a broader audience and was amazingly successful, going through fourteen printings in its first five months. By 1956, twenty years after the book had been originally released, more than 1.5 million copies of the hard cover edition had been sold to complement the 3.5 millions paperback editions, making it one of the most profitable books in the history of American publishing.

Like other middlebrow texts of the period, Carnegie's book was criticized in some highbrow circles. Kenneth Davis, for instance, has referred to its "grasping, crass materialism" and "odor of manipulation".[43] These criticisms appear to fit naturally with the general preoccupations of the text. Carnegie's view of human nature was related to a culture of materialism. His evaluation was a centrally negative one in which people are entirely selfish in their motivations and interests. His admonition that the most important word to any listener is his or her own name[44] is a striking example of the degree to which he placed his emphasis on the self-centeredness of society. In this fashion, Carnegie's book was a radical break from the psychologizing of the 1920s which sought to explain any number of social conditions and ills through reference to behaviourism and psycho-analysis. Carnegie's approach appeared to be much more logical and commonsensical. His advice was not clouded in jargon but was simple, direct and practical. The working person, Starker suggests, adopted Carnegie's advice because he or she was tired of being "impressed but confused".[45] Each chapter in *How to Win Friends* stated and demonstrated a single rule for better interaction with others ranging, from "Smile" to "Make the Other Person Feel Important". Additionally, the book was a timely though subtle promoter of corporate capitalism and industrial conglomeration. By 1937 the corporation had become the dominant force in American capitalism. Finding and keeping employment, being liked by co-workers and supervisors and being promoted had all become matters of great concern for a large number of Americans slowly emerging from a decade of complete destitution. Carnegie's book promised to reveal the answers to coping with precisely these concerns and as a consequence became a sort of business bible for men in grey flannel suits.

That *The Reader's Digest* should have condensed Carnegie's book can come as no surprise. In many ways *How to Win Friends* is the quintessential *Reader's Digest* text. Informative, practical and containing no huge levels of philosophy or jargon, the two were a

perfect match. An adaptation appeared in the first ever *Reader's Digest Condensed Book* in 1948. This volume, *Fourteen Reader's Digest Books*, was actually a precursor to the entire book club line which was launched in 1950 and featured all new condensations not previously published by *The Reader's Digest.* The 1948 text differs from the book club series in a number of ways. In the first instance, the books in the series were generally longer, running 575 pages on average. Secondly, they condensed fewer works, generally four or fives books in total. Finally, the book club volumes were extensively illustrated — generally with watercolours — in order to enhance their overall presentation.

By 1954, The Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club supported 2.5 million subscribers who counted on the editors to bring to them simplified versions of the best of contemporary literature. *Reader's Digest* editors would be invited by other publishers to read forthcoming books at the proof stage and, when they felt that their readers might be interested, acquired initial rights. Once the rights were secured the book would be condensed up to six individual times over the course of three to six weeks and, if the final product was regarded as acceptable, printed. The ultimate goal of the editors was to present a quarterly bound volume of two condensed novels and three works of non-fiction. Brevity and efficiency were the criteria by which condensations were measured. It can hardly be surprising, therefore, that the editors chose Carnegie for their first volume since Carnegie himself was able to summarize each section of his book into four charts outlining the entire rule hierarchy of his book. *The Reader's Digest* editors simply adopted this process and cut out most of the descriptive passages and anecdotal evidence which Carnegie used to illustrate the value of his rules. What remains is a series of rules which have to be taken largely on faith. Gone are the proofs, remaining are the reputations of Carnegie and the *Digest* editors. If one believed in either or both, then it is entirely possible to believe that no

further investigation was necessary and that all of the pertinent information had been reduced from a 246-page book to a thirteen-page outline.

Conclusions

Of course leading the reader to the original text was the stated goal of the adaptations which marketed themselves as half-way homes on the road to civilization. *Classics Illustrated* adaptations ended with the standard admonition "Now that you have read the *Classics Illustrated* edition, don't miss the added enjoyment of reading the original, obtainable at your school or public library" and *Digest* condensations always included full copyright and availability information. Joy Gould Boyum has pointed out that there was, in fact, a reciprocal arrangement between an adaptation and an original text as sales of originals often increased when the release of an adaptation spurred interest in the source material.[46] Yet whether or not the adaptation did lead audiences to read the originals is largely beside the point. What is at issue here is the fact that, for many Americans, the adaptation was a suitable substitute for the source text. The cover blurb for the Summer 1954 *Reader's Digest Condensed Book* featured a testimonial from Mrs. Arthur Harris who wrote of the pleasure which she, her husband and the local native population of a small Alaskan farming island received from the book condensations:

> During the shearing season, when we are busy indeed and the evenings are all too short, we lack both the time and energy to read long novels, however fine. The vivid condensations in *Condensed Books* come to the rescue. But there are other times when my husband is away for several days at a stretch, rounding up sheep at one or another of our camps. It is mighty lonely out there; but since the current volume of *Condensed Books* is the first thing that goes in his pack, he can look forward to entertaining and informative leisure hours. Meanwhile, I am no less content with back copies of our old stand-by, the *Digest* itself — unless, as is frequently the case, the natives have borrowed them.[47]

The highbrow critique of the middlebrow, of course, could provide little in response to this sort of testimonial. A reader who so clearly valued the practical aspects of a text, such as its size, could only be dismissed as wrong-headed. What the highbrow criticisms of adaptation so seriously missed was the degree to which the average adult, as Lowell Thomas wrote in his introduction to Carnegie's book, didn't give "two hoots" about Greek, Latin and higher mathematics.[48] For the highbrow critics, who had already lost the battle in terms, at least, of sheer commerce to the purveyors of ease-of-use, practicality and pleasure, there was little left to do but complain and hope that somehow the tide could be turned.

The ability to scoff at popular culture, of course, implies a still valid position from which to first identify then disparage lower taste cultures. While high culture demonstrates little possibility of disappearing it is reasonably clear that, since the beginning of this seminal twentieth century debate between high art and mass culture, their position no longer has very good prospects for expansion. Highbrow critics, in declaiming the middlebrow position, have argued that those audiences are incapable of dealing with the seriousness of high culture. Yet this argument fundamentally misrepresents the middlebrow position as it is articulated by readers such as Mrs. Harris. Traditionally denied access to high culture, the lowbrow reader was, by the twentieth century, shedding the yoke of romanticized folk cultures. Had highbrow critics been serious about a desire to protect their culture — as opposed to their power — they might have encouraged participation in high culture and vitiated the desire for popular culture. High culture, however, remained closed to the emerging middle-class because of the intransigence of the social and political elites who were aligned with high culture and were reluctant to grant mass participation in the high arts generally; or to provide the economic and social prerequisites required for participation in that culture. Many neo-aristocratic critics sought to deny universal literacy in fear of the potential political ramifications of such a development. In rejecting increased access, high

culture was sealed; the middlebrow emerged to fill a space in the class diaspora and became the dominant taste formation of twentieth-century America. The widespread complaints emanating from critics decrying the fact that a majority of the population had arrived at a culture which they both enjoyed and found useful is nothing less than the fear of revolt and anxiety over the diffusion of power which was now one stage removed from the traditional social, political and economic arenas and now writ large predominantly across the pages of culture.

CONCLUSION

Later chapters in the history of *The Reader's Digest* and *Classics Illustrated* are suggestive of the different ways which middlebrow culture has progressed since the 1950s. *Classics Illustrated* published their last original adaptation in 1962. Surviving on the income generated by the reprint of earlier *Classics*, Albert Kanter retired that same year. When his son left the family business later in the decade Kanter decided that it was time to sell the operation. Gilberton was bought by Patrick Frawley's Twin Circle publishing house, a young firm which planned to promote the line anew. Frawley's expectations of the series, however, never materialized. Only two new adaptations were produced during his term and by 1972 it was clear that rising costs and dwindling demand — largely due to the enormous impact of television on children's entertainment habits — had made the line unprofitable. *Classics Illustrated* ceased publication in 1972.[1] In 1990 the *Classics Illustrated* concept was re-launched by a combination effort of the comic book publisher First Comics and the book publisher Berkley Publishing Group, the publishers of *Roget's Thesaurus* and *Webster's Dictionary*. This version of the line was a complete inversion of the original conception. The comic books were marketed not for the stories which they adapted but, rather, for the artists and writers doing the adaptation. Respected and popular artists were brought in to generate interest in the comics fan communities. The comics were printed on high quality paper and usually featured fully-painted interior art and covers. The comics carried a retail price which was more than double the industry standard and did not sell well. The line was discontinued in 1992 and First Publishing declared bankruptcy. The Berkley Group ceased comics production altogether.

The Reader's Digest, on the other hand, still shows little intention of slowing their enormous growth. DeWitt Wallace retired from the Reader's Digest Association in 1973 at the age of eighty-three, having created the single greatest mass-publication success story in

American history. Rival general-interest magazines such as *Life*, *Look* and *The Saturday Evening Post* saw revenues drop precipitously during the 1970s as advertisers targeted specific audiences through specialist magazines. *The Reader's Digest*, however, continued its remarkable success. By 1980 the magazine boasted a worldwide circulation of more than fifty-four million copies each month and a six billion dollar per year revenue base. In 1986 the Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club sold more than 400 million volumes, accounting for more than two billion dollars of annual income. In 1988 *The Reader's Digest* boasted an American readership of more than fifty million people, audience figures which were bettered only by Bill Cosby's television show.[2] The on-going economic strength of *The Reader's Digest* is a testimony to the degree to which the middlebrow is still a dominant and vital culture in the daily life of the United States.

If the discourse of high/low has not expanded with the great speed of *The Reader's Digest*, it has proved more resilient than *Classics Illustrated*. The most serious re-articulation of this discourse in the 1980s and 1990s originated in Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*,[3] a number one best-seller in 1987. Bloom argued that the changes to the American university system which occurred in the 1960s had fundamentally altered the relation of individuals to knowledge and weakened the traditions upon which the United States had been based. He advocated a return to a traditional model of education in which high culture was taught in order to demonstrate its universal values. It was his contention that high culture had given previous generations a sense of purpose which was lacking in contemporary America:

> My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfilment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and enobling past....There was a respect for real learning, because it had a felt connection with their lives. This is what a community and a history mean, a common experience inviting high and low into a single body of belief.[4]

Bloom's suggestion that the canon of high culture which had previously united all American cultures was under attack was adopted by a number of neo-conservative critics who worked with President George Bush on education policy. Amongst these was Dinesh D'Souza, whose 1991 book *Illiberal Education* was also a best-seller. D'Souza asserted that the fundamental shift which had moved the United States away from high culture was multiculturalism: "Some of the same people who most stridently oppose a great books canon seem most active in devising their own consciously ideological and highly exclusive canon for race and gender education".[5] This reduction of the multiculturalist calls for a more inclusive curriculum echoes Bloom — who had railed against the "multiversity" as early as 1966[6] — particularly in its harkening back to an imagined history of a democratic high culture. E. D. Hirsch, whose views on multiculturalism are more nuanced though no less suspect than those of Bloom and D'Souza, suggested that multiculturalism actually does have a place in education because of its ability to teach tolerance, but he cautioned that a multicultural education must inevitably become subordinated to a canonical and traditional education which has in mind the "national interest":

> [Multiculturalism] should not be allowed to supplant or interfere with our schools' responsibility to our children's mastery of American literate culture. The acculturative responsibility of the schools is primary and fundamental. To teach the ways of one's own community has always been and still remains the essence to the education of our children, who enter neither a narrow tribal culture nor a transcendent world culture but a national literate culture.[7]

Hirsch's best-selling book, *Cultural Literacy*, enunciated a list of everything an American should know in order to be considered literate. In it, he located the central problematic of American culture as an emphasis on victim status as an excuse for tribalization and under-achievement. As yet, the most famous extension of this argument belongs to conservative columnist George Will and the first nationally syndicated denunciation of political correctness. In 1991, he wrote that "The status of victim is coveted as a source of

moral dignity and political power, so nerves are rubbed raw by the competitive cultivation of grievances. The more brittle campus relations become, the more aggressive moral therapy becomes, making matters worse."[8] For Will, as well as for others, oppression is not a historical or contemporary reality but, rather, a prize to be won in competition with other groups, all for the opportunity to extort compromise out of the benevolent institutionalized power structures.

That contemporary conservative attacks upon multiculturalism centre on the shifting status of canonical literature should not be surprising. The debate about culture in the United States has always revolved around the question of power and the ability of a privileged elite to maintain its own status. New challenges to that power in the forms of feminism and multiculturalism have simply brought to the fore the buried arguments which were always present in the high/low discourse. It must be remembered that the mass culture critique emerged from a moment in which urban spaces were becoming increasingly integrated and ethnically heterogeneous. At the same time, women were taking dramatic steps out of the home and into the workplace, altering their status within culture as active agents and cultural consumers. The degree to which these lines of attack have been shaped by the changing legal and social status of women and ethnic and racial minorities remains, unfortunately, still too concealed.

In eschewing these investigations in favour of maintaining a tight focus on the shifting conceptions of class in America, this thesis has attempted to suggest a number of possible routes for further investigation of the perceived crisis of the middlebrow. Studies which will centre more concretely on the important roles which gender and race have played in shaping these discourses are definitely required, as are studies which attempt to place middlebrow texts more firmly in the contexts in which they were approached and used by the audiences which supported them. This project has been an initial step in assessing the

degree to which the middlebrow was regarded as a problem of class privilege in the Cold War era. MacDonald argued that "Midcult is not, as might appear at first, a raising of the level of Masscult. It is rather a corruption of High Culture which has the enormous advantage over Masscult that .... it is able to pass itself off as the real thing."[9] MacDonald's fears seem to be a displacement here. What was being eroded was not, as he claimed, the authority of high culture, but the authority of the highbrow. In its challenge to traditional conceptions of elite cultural domination, middlebrow helped to weaken equivalent claims about the privilege of upper classes in other areas of American life. It was this effect which so concerned the highbrow critics of mass culture. This early de-mystification of upper-class privilege — intended or not — may ultimately prove to be the greatest value middlebrow texts like *The Reader's Digest* and *Classics Illustrated* have left as their legacy as cultural documents of mid-twentieth-century American life.

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How To Win Friends and Influence Shakespeare
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