

## These are Just Romances: Love and the Single Woman in the Fiction of Rosamond Lehmann

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Published online: 31 March 2011

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

**Abstract:** This article is a comparative analysis of Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927) and *The Weather in the Streets* (1936). It positions the romance plot of these fictions as part of a wider narrative concerning the single woman in the interwar years. Drawing on contexts of middlebrow culture, it tracks the single woman's renegotiation of romance in Lehmann's novels, arguing that the single woman appears as a fragmented and conflicted figure.

**About the Author:** Emma Sterry has just completed a PhD at the University of Strathclyde. Her thesis, entitled 'Transgressive Sexuality and Cultural Hierarchy: The Representation of the Single Woman in Women's Fiction, 1920s to 1940s', argues that the single woman is a locus for cultural anxieties concerning transgressive sexuality, gender spheres and brow boundaries. She explores a selection of texts by authors such as Ngaio Marsh, Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen and Djuna Barnes, to demonstrate how the single woman is caught between opposing ideologies of domesticity and bohemianism, tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, and heterosexual and homosexual desire. She is currently working on articles on Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, and the relationship between Anais Nin and modernist culture.

**Keywords:** cultural hierarchy, Emma Sterry, middlebrow, romance, Rosamond Lehmann, single woman, transgressive sexuality

In the 1920s, the popular novelist Berta Ruck read a selection of short stories written by the then-unpublished Rosamond Lehmann. Delivering her verdict, she proclaimed to Lehmann "I don't know if you'll ever be a writer [. . .] but you must write about things you know: these are just romances" (Hastings 60). In her biography of

Lehmann, Selina Hastings writes of how Lehmann felt “snubbed” by these words and felt inclined to give up writing altogether (60). For both Ruck and Lehmann, the descriptor “romance” is interpreted as an insult, signifying a genre devoid of credibility for a serious writer.

Since the 1920s, the genre of romance has been rescued from the margins and recuperated into academic discussion. Studies by critics such as Jean Radford, Janice Radway, Bridget Fowler, Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey have been instrumental in recovering romance as a locus for the exploration of literary, sociological and cultural constructions of femininity and female sexuality.<sup>[1]</sup> There has been a similarly recuperative trend in the study of Rosamond Lehmann and her fiction. This may well have begun as part of the larger recovery of forgotten female writers that was instigated by the first wave of feminist criticism, and certainly from the late 1960s onwards there has been a raft of monographs on Lehmann.<sup>[2]</sup> Many of these studies have undoubtedly sought to celebrate Lehmann as a writer of merit, though have perhaps overlooked the diversity of Lehmann’s fiction in their focus on the romance elements of her work. Certainly the subject matter of her fiction—often following the relationships and inner struggles of its female characters—has lent itself to this approach. Indeed, Wendy Pollard has tracked in detail the association of Lehmann’s fiction with a “feminine sensibility,” an approach that has been pervasive from contemporary reviews of Lehmann’s work through to relatively recent studies of it.<sup>[3]</sup> Such studies may well have been influenced by Lehmann’s private life. Her position within British interwar literary culture—her connections with the Bloomsbury group and her friendships with figures such as Lytton Strachey and Carrington, for example—her several marriages and her affair with the poet Cecil Day-Lewis have resulted in the construction of Lehmann as a literary celebrity, noted for her unorthodox and sometimes tumultuous love life, as much as for her writing.

In recent years, critics such as Andrea Lewis and Diana Wallace have recontextualized Lehmann’s fiction more explicitly within some of the wider debates concerning women, gender and sexuality between the wars. This change in approach may have arisen out of a revived interest in middlebrow fiction and culture, particularly what Nicola Humble has termed the “feminine middlebrow.”<sup>[4]</sup> Initially coined as a derogatory term in the 1920s, the middlebrow was problematic ground between elite, intellectual, “high” culture, and the popular “lowbrow” culture of the masses. It was condemned by literary figures such as Virginia Woolf and Q. D. Leavis for its attempts to assimilate modernist aspirations into narratives that dealt with every-day (and usually, middle-class) concerns. Given that the term first came into popular usage during the 1920s, it is perhaps not surprising that a substantial amount of criticism has focused on middlebrow culture between the wars. Studies by Nicola Humble, Alison Light, Faye Hammill and Janice Radway<sup>[5]</sup> have been instrumental in refiguring middlebrow culture, and especially middlebrow fiction, as a site in which to reposition previously neglected writers, re-examine discussion of cultural hierarchies and re-imagine the interwar literary landscape.

To return to Ruck, then, it becomes apparent that her dismissal of Lehmann’s early stories as “just romances” holds less currency in the current climate of literary criticism. Certainly in a climate where brow boundaries are constantly shifting and being redrawn, the cultural authority that Ruck—a prolific romantic novelist—would have had herself becomes a contentious point. But more significantly, studies of romance have sought to deconstruct the genre—to expose its fissures, its inconsistencies and its diversities. The

criticism on Lehmann's fiction has already begun to do this. Works by Judy Simons and Gillian Tindall, alongside more recent studies by Diana Wallace and Sophie Blanch, have identified an "anti-romantic" (Blanch 2) motif in Lehmann's fiction, revealed through the repeated subversion of romance conventions. Diana Wallace has perhaps been the most important and persuasive in her critique of Lehmann's romance narratives, offering a sustained account of how both *Dusty Answer* (1927) and *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) shatter the illusion of romance in the wake of the war (Wallace 2000). Since "classic romances are centred on heterosexual relationships" (Pearce and Stacey 14) and often achieve a domestic resolution in marriage (Fowler 7-8), the anxiety concerning single women after the First World War, and the increased freedoms available to them, meant that the tropes of romance were to be subverted, reworked and redeployed in an effort to make that anxiety legible. Wallace's and Blanch's work is crucial in illuminating how a preoccupation with romance in Lehmann's fiction need not limit scholarly discussions of her work, by indicating how the romance narrative is only part of a web of representations concerning female sexuality.

Building on these critical accounts, I argue that the romance plot might be read specifically as part of a wider narrative concerning the single woman. There are a considerable number of sociohistorical accounts of the single woman<sup>[6]</sup>, but the body of work on her appearance in literature is still nascent. The single woman has appeared as the focus of a number of studies of Victorian and interwar fiction, but criticism has tended to focus on particular conceptions of the single woman in discrete periods. For example, the New Woman has been examined by critics such as Sally Ledger and Emma Liggins as one of the new identities available to women during the fin-de-siècle.<sup>[7]</sup> The spinster, meanwhile, has been analyzed in relation to 1920s fiction.<sup>[8]</sup> Broader literary studies of gender and sexuality have considered a wider range of forms that the single woman appears in addressed,<sup>[9]</sup> but comparative analysis of these forms has been largely absent. Indeed, literary criticism on the single woman has typically failed to recognize that if being single means, in its most basic sense, "unmarried," the category can be expanded to include widows, divorcées, and even lesbians. Furthermore, I suggest that existing work has failed to explore the difficulties in distinguishing between these different forms of single woman. These difficulties are evident in analyzing Lehmann's fiction. In *Dusty Answer* (1927), Judith Earle appears caught between the allure of both heterosexual and homosexual desire, but is unable to achieve lasting happiness with either: so is she more like the lesbian or the spinster? Similarly, in the beginning of *The Weather in the Streets* (1936), Olivia Curtis leads her life as an independent single woman, even though she is legally still married. Is she closer to the New Woman or the divorcee? Or is she simply an adulterer?

Considering how these texts function as romance narratives, then, offers the opportunity to consider how the single woman appears in literature as a conflicted figure in the interwar years, without compartmentalizing her into clearly defined roles. Rather than labeling these texts as anti-romantic as Wallace and others do, I explore the subtleties and complexities of how they track the single woman as she renegotiates her expectations and experiences of romance. Part of the way in which I do this is by rooting the texts more explicitly in middlebrow culture. Nicola Humble has described middlebrow fiction as a "hybrid form," which draws on conventions taken from a range of narratives including the country house novel, children's literature, and romance (Humble 4). These narratives share a heterosexist agenda, but in the feminine middlebrow this agenda is often compromised.

My aim is to demonstrate this conflict is played out by foregrounding how the single woman both predicated the heterosexual romance plot, and yet also emerges as a subversive figure within it.

*Dusty Answer* opens with Judith Earle reminiscing about the four cousins who would periodically come to stay in the house next door to where she grew up. Judith describes the hustle and bustle that ensues when the Fyfe cousins visit:

Gardeners mowed and mowed, and rolled and rolled the tennis-court; and planted tulips and forget-me-nots in the stone urns that bordered the lawn and the river's edge [. . .] the next-door children must still be there with their grandmother – mysterious and thrilling children who came and went. (7)

The romanticization of the Fyfe house creates a hazy, nostalgic picture of Judith's childhood, but this is sharply juxtaposed with the present, post-war context:

in truth all was different now. The grandmother had died soon after she heard Charlie was killed. He had been her favourite, her darling one. He had, astoundingly, married the girl Mariella when they were both nineteen, and he was just going to the front. He had been killed directly, and some months afterward Mariella had had a baby. (7)

The text hints at a lost age of innocence, in which romantic ideals of love and marriage have been replaced with widowhood and responsibility. Diana Wallace has observed that the unhappy endings in Lehmann's fiction "articulate a nostalgia for a prelapsarian romance – a dream of love as it could have existed before the war, had a generation of young men not been slaughtered" (161). This nostalgic tone is certainly evident in the opening of *Dusty Answer*, but this "dream of love," as it appears between Mariella and Charlie at least, is rooted in domestic romance conventions which advocate heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Mariella may have adhered to domestic romance conventions, but she is not rewarded for these efforts; instead, she is left widowed and in charge of her household, a task for which she seems unfit. She proclaims to Judith that does not "understand children" (12) and later passes guardianship of her own child, Michael Peter, to Julian, another of the Fyfe cousins. War rids Mariella of the chance of a family, and shatters the illusion of resolution that domestic romance offers.

Against this backdrop, it seems somewhat inevitable that the assimilation of the single woman into a heterosexual romance narrative and, ultimately, marriage, will be a problematic path. The text works through these complications as Judith pursues relationships with each of the three male Fyfe cousins. Charlie is an adolescent fixation for Judith, one whom she fantasizes one day will want to marry her (13). The naivety of Judith's romantic dreams in a world that will soon be blighted by war is alluded to in the ghost-like figure of Charlie, whose early death in the text haunts Judith. Even in childhood, Charlie belongs to myth rather than reality:

Charlie was beautiful as a prince. He was fair and tall with long bright golden hair that he tossed back from his forehead, and pale clear skin. He had a

lovely straight white nose, and a girl's mouth with full lips slightly apart, and jutting cleft chin. He kept his shirt collar unbuttoned, and the base of his throat showed white as a snow-drop. (13)

The depiction of Charlie draws on fairy-tale motifs, yet, curiously, his beauty has both masculine and feminine qualities. Consequently, he is eroticized as a romantic hero onto whom Judith can project her childlike desires while maintaining a safe distance from aggressively masculine sexuality. Although Judith re-enacts the passive femininity a fairy-tale narrative would demand of her, she does this in a dreamworld in which she imagines herself nursing Charlie as he lays sick back to health; she then becomes ill herself, dies, and watches from beyond as Charlie tends to her grave.

This idealized fantasy of a relationship cannot exist outside of Judith's childhood, and this is perhaps reflected in her failure to read heterosexual romance outside of the fairy tale. She finds it near impossible to fathom why Charlie and Mariella have married. When she thinks of them in the same bed, she realizes that it is likely that Mariella will have a baby by Charlie: "It was all so queer and happy, so like the dreams from whose improbabilities she woke in heaviness of spirit, that it was impossible to realize" (43). Judith struggles to understand the physical consequences of romance; for her, the thought of a baby materializing is "queer" and somehow odd. As she fantasizes about Charlie, she shows an inability to conceive of romance as anything more than a dream, and remains preoccupied with its idealization, relegating Charlie to the role of a "romantic illusion, a beautiful plaything of the imagination" (46). Yet even as Judith matures she appears unable to reconcile herself to the realities of heterosexual romance. She becomes increasingly attracted to another of the Fyfe cousins, Roddy, and although initially their relationship remains a friendship, she assures herself:

Someday it would happen: it must. She had always known that the play of Roddy must be written and that she must act it to the end – the happy end. 'Roddy, I am going to love you.' (51)

The intensity of Judith's attraction to Roddy is mitigated through the discourse in which she expresses it. The "happy end" she refers to is the climax of a fairy tale, and romance appears as a drama rather than a reality.

For Judith, Roddy begins as intangible a figure as Charlie was; Roddy's is "a dream rather than a real face" which wears "that haunting quality of curiousness which a face in a dream bears" (9). Roddy is not a beautiful prince like Charlie, and instead the text insists on his unusualness, repeatedly referring to him as "queer" and "unreal." Roddy represents a world which seems out of Judith's reach, as he leads a creative, almost itinerant existence. His cousin, Julian, mocks him for having attended ballet school, and in his late teens, Roddy departs for Paris to train in drawing and art. Roddy's queerness takes on different connotations when he enrolls at Cambridge University and forms a friendship with fellow student, Tony Baring:

[Tony] had a sensitive face, changing all the time, a wide mouth with beautiful sensuous lips, thick black hair and a broad white forehead with the

eyebrows meeting above the nose, strongly marked and mobile. When he spoke he moved them, singly or together, His voice was soft and precious, and he had a slight lisp. He looked like a young poet. Suddenly she noticed his hands, – thin, unmasculine hands, – queer hands – making nervous appealing ineffectual gestures that contradicted the nobility of his head, She heard him call Roddy ‘my dear’; and once ‘darling’; and had a passing shock. (95-6)

Tony’s feminine face is clearly different from Charlie’s beauty; instead of the romantic fairy-tale hero, Tony is drawn as an effeminate and probably homosexual character, “sensitive,” “soft,” and “precious.” The comparison of Tony to a young poet hints at a world where aesthetics, literature, and knowledge are bound up in a homosocial ideology that crosses over into the homoerotic. In her biography of Rosamond Lehmann, Selina Hastings describes the “intensity of [. . .] male friendships” that Lehmann witnessed during her time at Cambridge University, and implies that the discreetness of male homosexuality at Cambridge (as opposed to its more flamboyant expression at Oxford University) did nothing to dispel her naivety concerning male romantic relationships at that time (46-7). Although, as Hastings points out, the “aesthete dandy” culture was more pronounced at Oxford (48), it nonetheless emerges to a degree in the Cambridge environment depicted in *Dusty Answer*. Through the description of Tony, and his friendship with Roddy, queerness in the text is refigured; rather than remaining something odd or unreal, it is a synonym for homosexuality. In contrast to Judith’s difficulties in reading heterosexual romance, Judith recognizes Tony is an obstacle to her own potential relationship with Roddy. This is illustrated in a conversation she has with Roddy:

‘Tony is jealous of me. Once he looked at me with pure hatred. I’ve never forgotten it. Does he love you?’  
‘I think he does.’  
‘I think he does too. Do you love him? You needn’t answer. I know I mustn’t ask you that.’  
‘You can ask me anything you like.’  
But he did not answer. (150)

Judith’s questions intimate that Tony’s feelings for Roddy are reciprocated, and Roddy does not deny this. Judith thus recognizes the blurring of the homosocial with the homosexual.

The potentially homosexual relationship between Tony and Roddy is overshadowed in the text by the relationship Judith forms with Jennifer, a fellow student at Cambridge. Diana Wallace has put forward a compelling argument that the male homosocial paradigm of the “erotic triangle” (in which male homosociality is mediated through the female object of their rivalry) is critiqued in the text through the seemingly romantic relationship between Judith and Jennifer (160-80). While Wallace perhaps overlooks the extent to which the relationship between Tony and Roddy also critiques this triangle (since in this relationship, Roddy becomes the object of Tony’s and Judith’s rivalry), it does highlight how *Dusty Answer* deconstructs the conventions of romance by refiguring the girls’ school story, bringing its sexual undertones of passionate female friendships to the fore. While Wallace does this convincingly, she fails to engage with the way in which the blurring of

female homosocial and homosexual desire is taken out of a school context, and moved into the more intellectual, highbrow arena of higher education. Judith's enrollment at Cambridge University allows the text to explore wider interwar concerns over increased access to higher education for women that makes legible anxiety not only over the emancipation of women, but the perceived "middlebrowing" of culture. The Fyfe cousins tease Judith for her educational aspirations; Roddy asks "[t]hen you intend to become a young woman with *really* intellectual interests?" (55). Roddy's humorous undermining of any intellectual pretensions Judith may harbor takes on a more serious meaning when Judith responds "I don't think I'm particularly clever" (55). Although Judith's comment is uttered abstractedly, it nonetheless becomes part of a rhetoric that views women in higher education as a threat to its elite culture. When Judith confides in Roddy about her fears concerning communal living, Roddy jokes: "Don't get standardized, or I shan't come and visit you" (92). The use of the term "standardization" is telling, invoking highbrow concern over the standardization of taste that was associated with middlebrow culture.<sup>[10]</sup> *Dusty Answer* filters debates concerning cultural hierarchies through its refiguring of the romance narrative. The role of women in higher education becomes part of the romantic play between Judith and Roddy, yet it also hints at how the intellectual world of Cambridge enables Judith to accrue cultural capital in an environment where she is no longer an object of mediation between men, but part of a female homosocial network.

The relationship between Judith and Jennifer, then, not only subverts the paradigm of the "erotic triangle", but also elides the standardization of Judith; by aligning her with the homosocial/sexual, Judith becomes part of the male aesthetic culture associated with higher education. Judith's attraction to Jennifer is described in a discourse of romantic poetry:

somebody's fair head, so fiercely alive that it seemed delicately to light the air around it; a vivacious emphatic head, turning and nodding; below it a white neck and shoulder, generously modelled, leaned across the table. The face came suddenly, all curves, the wide mouth laughing, warm coloured . . . It made you think of warm fruit, – peaches and nectarines mellowed in the sun.  
(110)

Compared to Roddy's elusive face, Jennifer's is vividly alive; one Judith cannot take her eyes off. Judith's yearning for Jennifer is made explicit: "Always Jennifer. It was impossible to drink up enough of her; and a day without her was a day with the light gone" (131). While the text is keen to emphasize Jennifer's femininity, she is still something of an ambiguous character; as Jennifer laughingly says: "I don't suppose I should ever marry. I'm too tall, – six foot in my stockings" (118). For Judith, however, Jennifer is an object of worship, the "[g]lorious, glorious pagan that I adore" whispered the voice in Judith that could never speak out" (137). Jonathan Coe has interpreted this silenced voice as symbolic of how the relationship between Jennifer and Judith is never consummated, arguing that "it's clear that Judith at least never acts on the impulse" (9). Implicit in Coe's reading is the insinuation that Jennifer is the dominant and more overtly lesbian of the two women. Indeed, Jennifer's love for Judith is more heavily eroticized, displaying sexual jealousy over any potential male suitors Judith may have: "'You mustn't love anybody,' said Jennifer. 'I should want to kill him. I should be jealous.'" (130). Although Judith does not necessarily

share this sexualized ardor, she is still enthralled by Jennifer, and this compromises her position with the plot of heterosexual romance, despite the fact that she remains in contact with Roddy. Judith's endeavors to keep Jennifer and Roddy apart could be construed as a measure to keep Roddy as the unreal figure of her dreams, and Jennifer part of her reality. Jennifer's presence certainly has a powerful effect on Judith. When Jennifer tells Judith that she loves her, Roddy disappears from Judith's mind: "at those words, that look, Roddy faded again harmlessly: Jennifer blinded and enfolded her sense once more, and only Jennifer had power" (130).

Tellingly, Judith's relationship with Roddy can only progress following the disintegration of her relationship with Jennifer. When Jennifer begins a passionate friendship with an older woman, Geraldine, her absence signals the apparent re-entry of Judith back into the heterosexual romance narrative. The exchanges of love and kisses between Judith and Roddy on the night that they consummate their relationship underneath the willow trees has the melodrama of classic romance (Blanch 2009), but so much so that it verges on the parodic. Indeed, Sophie Blanch has astutely identified a "subtle manipulation of the romance trope" through a prefacing of the episode with laughter (10). The sexual encounter between Judith and Roddy is revealed to be a false start; when Judith writes a letter to Roddy the next morning, she intimates she wishes to marry him, but is rebuffed by Roddy:

'If a man wants to ask a girl to – marry him he generally asks her himself – do you see?'

'You mean – it was outrageous of me not to wait – to write like that?'

'I thought it a little odd.' (226)

It seems ironic that the bohemian Roddy should hold such conservative views of marriage, but the broken dialogue between him and Judith hints at an underlying unease about the discussion of marriage itself that does not correlate with Roddy's reiteration of heterosexual convention. Judith's inability to see beyond the script of romance is ultimately what leads to her heartbreak:

'If you'd warned me, Roddy . . . given me some hint. I was so romantic and idealistic about you – you've no idea [. . .]'

'I did try to shew [sic] you, I tell you. [. . .] Didn't I say I was never to be taken seriously?' (229)

Despite Blanch's claims of Judith's "displacement from the site of laughter" (6), romance itself becomes a cruel joke that is played on Judith. From the point when Roddy rejects her, Judith's attempts at maneuvering herself into romantic convention are never elevated beyond an almost comic futility. Martin Fyfe proposes to Judith and although she initially accepts his proposal, she does not love him and quickly breaks off the engagement. The drama which Judith initially envisioned playing out with Roddy becomes a farce when she joins her mother in France, and adopts the role of a woman on the market for marriage. When an overweight and elderly French count asks her mother if he can marry Judith, the narrator describes it as "a very good joke" (260). Having been rejected by both Jennifer and



Roddy, romance, both within and outside of the conventions of heterosexual domesticity, becomes a punchline for Judith. Therefore, when the last of her male suitors, Julian Fyfe, asks Judith to be his lover, he makes it explicit that he will never offer her marriage. The decision of whether or not to accept his offer is removed from Judith's hands, when she has to break the news to Julian that Martin has died at sea, and Julian leaves France. Now that three potential romances with the Fyfe cousins have ended, Judith thinks to herself: "Slowly, the darkness was lifting. Soon now, Jennifer's letter must come, and a new beginning dawn out of this end of all things" (289). This new beginning marks a post-romantic, post-war life, in which Judith sheds the burden of the romance narrative: "She was rid at last of the weakness, the futile obsession of dependence on other people. She had nobody now except herself, and that was best." (303). Romance has burnt itself out and the novel ends with the sense that Judith has left the romance of youth behind.

If *Dusty Answer* has been perceived as the text with which Lehmann deconstructs romantic convention, as part of a growing-up narrative for single young women, then Lehmann's later novel, *The Weather in the Streets* (1936), explores the effect of that deconstruction as part of a grown-up narrative for single young women. The text takes up the story of Olivia Curtis, the seventeen year-old debutante of Lehmann's earlier novel, *Invitation to the Waltz* (1930). Unlike the young Judith Earle, Olivia has followed romantic convention, having married the novelist and poet Ivor: "We were in love so we must be married. I never thought of anything else. I suppose one never gets away from good upbringing" (*Weather* 45). Olivia's decision to marry seems rooted in the middle-class ideology she grew up in, but her attraction to Ivor moves beyond the confines of the domestic sphere:

He was romance, culture, aesthetics, Oxford, all I wanted then. Oxford had been a potent draught, grabbed at and gulped down without question. To live the remainder of one's life in that condition – towery, branchy, cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmed – had seemed the worthy summit of human happiness. (44)

Ivor offers Olivia the opportunity to become involved in a world of higher education that she did not experience for herself, and her construction of love becomes bound up with her romanticization of intellectual, highbrow culture. The marriage does not last though, and having rejected the domestic duties of married life, Olivia is able to enjoy a bohemian lifestyle as offered to her by modern urban living in London, attending parties with her photographer friend Anna and her artistic associates. It is implied that Olivia's change of lifestyle is somehow a direct result of the breakdown of her marriage. When Olivia suggests that she should have lived with Ivor before they had married, her sister, Kate, retorts: "It's no good pretending you were so frightfully unconventional and free-lovish – in those days anyway" (44). Olivia's estrangement from her husband signifies a move towards a more unconventional existence.

Olivia's deviation from convention is not so extreme as to preclude her from heterosexual romance altogether, however. Diana Wallace has tracked a trend in 1930s women's fiction which used "the marriage plot specifically to explore how marriage might be refashioned to accommodate women's increasing expectations in sexual, political and professional life" (63). *The Weather in the Streets* does not belong to this tradition of

remolding marriage, given that Olivia seemingly abandons it altogether, but it does fit into the wider tradition of renegotiating the role of the single woman in heterosexual romance, following a spate of fictions in the 1920s that explored lesbian desire.<sup>[11]</sup> Ten years after Lehmann explored a potentially lesbian relationship in *Dusty Answer*, the correlation between transgressive female sexuality and lesbianism that was the vogue of the 1920s has faded. Attending a party at the Spencers' house, Olivia begins to converse with Marigold about the failure of her marriage. Steered by Marigold, the conversation turns towards a discussion of transgressive sexuality:

'Have you ever felt attracted like that?'  
'No, I never have'  
'I bet if I were like that I'd make a pass at you.' She patted and stroked Olivia's hip with a light clinging touch [. . .]  
She turned and looked at Marigold and said: 'But that's not why my marriage didn't work.' (*Weather* 106)

Olivia's refusal to remain within the domestic sphere is still viewed with sexual suspicion here, but Olivia is keen to explicitly distance herself from any questions about her sexual orientation, and the rejection of a lesbian subplot is symptomatic of a narrative that is devoid of passionate friendships between women. Gone is the intimate, collegiate living of the young women in *Dusty Answer*, replaced instead with London flats and largely absent flatmates. Olivia lives with her cousin Etty, an ethereal character who drifts in and out of the text. When Olivia wakes up Etty to inform her that she is returning home to visit her father who has been taken suddenly ill, Etty's efforts to rouse herself and help Olivia are rather ineffectual (9). She instead bids Olivia goodbye, "[p]ressing all her cardinal-red fingertips to her mouth, she kissed them, extended them wistfully, passionately" (9). Since Etty's "hollowed eyes stared with their morning look of pathos and exhaustion" (9-10), her passion appears empty and performative.

Olivia's photographer friend, Anna, is a more tangible presence in the text and through her Olivia can access the artistic world. But Olivia always remains on the periphery of this bohemianism: she does not possess any artistic talent herself and instead only works part-time for Anna in a secretarial capacity. The bohemian world that the text alludes to is a product of urban modernity which raises questions about how the single woman moves in the city sphere. Olivia's marital status only further problematizes her position in this world. Kate points out to Olivia that her refusal to formally divorce Ivor compromises her heterosexual availability: "even the most broad-minded men are a bit – well, on their guard about a woman who's legally married to some submerged person in the offing. They don't want to get mixed up –" (48). Implicit in Kate's words is the anxiety concerning boundaries between public and private life, particularly in regard to single women. While still married to Ivor, Olivia's presence on the London streets transgresses domestic conventions that demand she be relegated to the private sphere. When Olivia informs Kate that she had unexpectedly met Ivor out one night, Kate expresses shock that Olivia engaged in conversation with him. Her surprise stems from the visibility of this exchange. Olivia initially seems keen to distance herself from what she perceives as a middle-class characteristic: "In a public place! . . . What a foul expression. You're as bad as Mother: 'Not in front of the servants'" (42). Olivia's comments highlight anxiety over the

visibility of the middle-class woman in the public spaces of the city. Deborah Parsons' study of women and the city has drawn on a range of fictions by both middlebrow and modernist female writers including Lehmann, Jean Rhys and Anaïs Nin, to show how they depict women "entering and seeking legitimate places in the urban and professional landscape of modernity" (8). These fictions essentially rework the Victorian motif of the urban, public woman as prostitute: a motif built on the equation of the streetwalker with the lower-classes. Parsons argues that the "middle-class woman walking in the city is a problematic figure for the threatened male [. . .] as she is not a sexually available object and her economic security protects her from punishment as a fallen woman" (85). The middle-class Olivia, though, is not seen walking the streets, but inhabiting the semi-public bars and cafes found on them. Her inability to move out from the shadows of those places and onto the city streets is due to her ambiguous marital status; she cannot be reabsorbed into the conventional heterosexual romance plot but is not entirely exempt from the association of women in public urban spaces with lower-class sexual immorality.

Olivia's own concern over the disintegration of the rigid boundaries between the lower and middle classes within the public/private dichotomy crystallizes in the anxiety she expresses over her own class status during her affair with the aristocratic Rollo Spencer, a man whom Olivia had first met in the novel's precursor, *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932). Certainly different in tone to *Weather*, *Invitation* has often been perceived as a coming-of-age novel about the seventeen year-old Olivia, with critics identifying the Rollo Spencer as the romantic hero of the text.<sup>[12]</sup> But this hero is not for Olivia—at her coming-of-age dance, Rollo meets Nicola Maude, the woman who has become his wife by the time Olivia is reunited with him in *Weather*. Although the feeling of romantic nostalgia characteristic of the text remains, this is undermined by an indication that the feeling may not last. In an exchange between Olivia and Rollo, Olivia sees the beautiful Nicola as a natural match for the handsome and alluring Rollo. Rollo himself, on the other hand, is rather dismissive of her, declaring "I dare say she's as stupid as an owl" (*Invitation*, 275). Nonetheless, she remains a captivating figure for him, and when Nicola beckons him, he leaves Olivia's side to be with her. Even before *Weather*, we see Olivia on the margins of romance, a mere observer.

The affair that she embarks on with Rollo in *Weather* initially allows Olivia an active role in the heterosexual romance plot, but as the novel progresses it becomes clear that Olivia's position within romantic discourse remains problematic. Olivia not only removes herself from the domestic sphere, but corrupts it in doing so. She not only contributes to the failure of Rollo's marriage to Nicola, but also breaks her own marriage vows; since she is not legally separated from Ivor, she is an adulterer in the eyes of the law. The illicitness of their affair means that Olivia's navigation of the public/private dichotomy becomes increasingly fraught. Deborah Parsons suggests that in Lehmann's fiction we see how boundaries between "independence, respectability and public visibility have collapsed confusingly into each other" (146). In refusing to divorce her own husband, and in starting an affair with someone else's, Olivia is denied the chance to legitimately inhabit the modern cityscape, since to do so would risk the exposure of her and Rollo's affair. In an attempt to give their relationship a degree of respectability, Olivia tries to maneuver their relationship into more exclusive semi-public spaces:

I'd have liked to go the smart places where people eat, and to theatres and dance places. He didn't want to. Of course it wouldn't do, he knows all those well-connected faces, they're his world . . . He only wanted to be alone somewhere and make love. (*Weather* 162)

Rollo's position within the upper social strata means he is able to enjoy the city on his own terms, but he cannot offer Olivia access to this world: the visibility of Rollo within the privileged sections of the public sphere demands that Olivia stay out of them. So instead they dine in smaller, lesser-known restaurants, and huddle together in their dark corners. For Olivia even in those places their affair "came nearer being a public relationship, a reality in the world more than anywhere else" (163), but it cannot ever be a wholly public and open one.

Olivia's efforts to reposition herself in the more respectable areas of the city is emblematic of what Andrea Lewis sees as her anxiety over her "middle class status": namely, that it "will be compromised by her potential associations with lower-class indiscretion" (84), an anxiety that contradicts the implied progressiveness of Olivia. This anxiety further reveals itself when Olivia falls pregnant with Rollo's child: "Is it a symptom, does it seal my fate? . . . The female, her body used, fertile, turning, resentful, in hostile untouchability, from the male, the enemy victorious and malignant . . . like cats or bitches . . . Urgh!" (230).

Olivia's withdrawal from the domestic sphere is problematized by the way in which she fulfils the reproductive functions demanded of her by the heterosexual order, yet does so through transgressing heterosexual romance conventions. She appears resentful at the thought of pregnancy and disconnected from the child she is carrying, but this does not mean she is without regret when she chooses to abort the child. Afterwards she confides to Rollo: "I'm the one to mind – I wanted it . . . you didn't. For you it would be just a tiresome mistake, but for me it was a grief . . . so I must bear it by myself" (327). Her grief may also be due, in part, to how the abortion cements her violation of middle-class dictates of respectability. Olivia turns to Etty for advice when she realizes she is pregnant, but pretends that she is asking for a friend of hers who is in trouble. In doing so, Olivia refuses to "[e]nter into the feminine conspiracy, be received with tact, sympathy, pills and hot-water bottles, we're all in the same boat, all unfortunate women caught out after a little indiscretion" (239). As Andrea Lewis has pointed out, abortion during the interwar years was mostly associated with the lower classes, and Olivia demonstrates her awareness of this when she invokes the term "indiscretion."

The illegality of abortion at this time means that the single woman's rejection of her reproductive function is effectively criminalized, but the disintegration of Rollo's marriage to Nicola following her inability to conceive perpetuates reproduction as an integral part of domestic romantic convention. Nicola herself is largely absent from the text, but Rollo paints her as a neurasthenic figure, frequently "taking to her bed" and fashioning herself as an invalid following a miscarriage (103). Nicola's inability to provide Rollo with an heir poses a threat to the class demands placed upon him, undermining his masculinity and his capacity to continue a patrilineal line of inheritance. Whereas Olivia's pregnancy threatens her sexual morality, her social standing, and her ability to claim a legitimate space for herself in urban modernity, Rollo's position within the heterosexual romance plot remains uncompromised. Rollo breaks off his relationship with Olivia when he resumes sexual

relations with his wife; Olivia only discovers Nicola is pregnant following her own abortion. Normative domestic romance is restored, at least for Rollo. Olivia, it seems, is doomed to remain on the margins of it; when Rollo is involved in a car crash, she goes to visit him in hospital. There seems a suggestion that Olivia resumes her affair with Rollo, and Lehmann herself addresses the implications of this during a discussion with Janet Watts: "Do you think she went on seeing him? [. . .] Yes, I suppose she did. I expect it all went on and on, I'm sorry to say. It never became a tragedy, exactly . . . it couldn't become one. And yet it was" (*Weather* 4).

It is clear in these works by Lehmann that romance still holds an allure for the single woman, but it cannot be realized in the post-war world. In *Dusty Answer* heterosexual romance belongs to the past, and no longer offers comfort to the single woman. Yet homosexual love for Judith is equally disappointing; even when subverting convention, romance eludes her grasp. *The Weather in the Streets*, by contrast, is a post-romantic, rather than an anti-romantic, tale, that tracks the single woman's negotiations of the new freedoms available to her in modern, urban living, while exploring her glances backwards to the security that heterosexual romance once promised.

Both the terms "romance" and "middlebrow" have been used as synonyms for "popular" literature, but as Jean Radford has pointed out, "popular" is an "unstable category" that "can only be understood *in relation* to what it is being referred to in an historically given instance" (4). The middlebrow's association with the popular is particularly problematic since it tends to obscure the complexity of the middlebrow in cultural hierarchy and glosses over some of the aesthetic experimentation it engaged with in its nod toward modernism. In extracting the term middlebrow from its derogatory status, it can become a fruitful site in which to explore representations of transgression, especially transgressive female sexuality. Even love itself becomes an aspiration in middlebrow fiction—a means of accessing a masculine, intellectual, highbrow world that the single woman was previously excluded from. Lehmann's fictions are not "just romances," but complex and conflicted responses to romantic conventions rendered outdated and untenable for the single woman in a post-war world.

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[1] Janice Radway has been pivotal in advancing sociological understandings of romance readership (see particularly *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*). Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey's collection of essays, *Romance Revisited*, has adopted an explicitly feminist agenda in its examination of romance as a literary and cultural category, while Bridget Fowler has focused on reading romance as a form of popular literature (see *The Alienated Reader*).

[2] These include Diana E LeStourgeon. *Rosamond Lehmann*. New York. Twayne, 1965; Gillian Tindall. *Rosamond Lehmann: An Appreciation*. London. Chatto and Windus/The Hogarth Press, 1985; Ruth Siegel. *Rosamond Lehmann: A Thirties Writer*. New York. Peter Lang, 1989; Judy Simons. *Rosamond Lehmann*. Basingstoke. Macmillan, 1992; Selina Hastings. *Rosamond Lehmann*. London. Chatto and Windus, 2002.

[3] Wendy Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception*. Aldershot. Ashgate, 2004.

[4] See Nicola Humble. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s – 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism*. Oxford and New York. Oxford University Press, 2001.

[5] See especially Faye Hammill. *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars*. Texas. University of Texas Press, 2007; Mary Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment*. New Jersey. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009; Alison Light. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. London. Routledge, 1991; Janice Radway, 'The Scandal of the Middlebrow: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Class Fracture and Cultural Authority'. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89: 4. Fall 1990, 704-32.

[6] These include: Katherine Holden. *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914 – 1960*. Manchester. Manchester University Press, 2007; and Sheila Jeffreys. *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880 – 1930*. London. Pandora Press, 1985; and Martha Vicinus. *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850 – 1920*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1985.

[7] See Sally Ledger. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin-de-Siècle*. Manchester. Manchester University Press, 1997; and Emma Liggins. *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture*. Aldershot. Ashgate, 2006.

[8] See, for instance, a selection of essays in Laura Doan. Ed. *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*. Urbana. University of Illinois Press, 1991; and Maroula Joannou. *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows: Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change, 1918 – 1938*. Oxford. Berg, 1995.

[9] Particularly useful are: Deborah Parsons. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2000; and Elaine Showalter. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle*. London. Virago, 1992.

[10] Janice Radway has written at length about the debates concerning standardization and middlebrow culture in her analysis of the Book-of-the-Month Club in America. See Janice Radway. 'The Scandal of the Middlebrow: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Class Fracture and Cultural Authority.' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89: 4. Fall 1990. 704-32.

[11] The most notorious of these was Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).

[12] See particularly Diana Wallace's and Judy Simon's studies of romance in Lehmann's fiction.

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