Delafield’s 1928 novel earned the dubious accolade of appearing in a footnote in Q.D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Leavis identifies it as exemplifying a deplorable suburban idiom, characteristic of middlebrow inauthenticity, “in which everything said has a stale flavour of having been acquired from the newspaper or magazine”.¹ *The Suburban Young Man* might have drawn Leavis’s attention partly because of its theme, which has some affinity with *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Its writer-protagonist, suburban Peter Jannett begins, after an abortive love-affair with upper-class Antoinette Rochester, to achieve an authenticity in his writing that has previously eluded him. Delafield’s text posits an affinity between constructions of the suburbs and of the middlebrow, but also disrupts these constructions, subversively suggesting that good writing may yet emerge from suburbia.

Leavis’s text critiques middlebrow writing for its aspirations towards literary quality, its homogeneity of style and form, and its uncontrolled expansion in an enlarged literary marketplace. Suburbanites were similarly mocked for the homogeneity of their homes and lives, their aspirations toward a higher class status, and their apparently ceaseless and unlimited growth. Suburbia was often characterised as an organic development, the “octopus” strangling England in Williams-Ellis’s formulation, and there were similar characterisations of the middlebrow. For Virginia Woolf, middlebrow is a “bloodless and pernicious pest ... a fungoid growth”.² Middlebrows, in Woolf’s model, cannot attain to the intellectual rigour of the highbrow, and they also lack the physical vigour of the lowbrow; they are “betwixt and between”.³ The intermediate positioning of the middlebrow in cultural terms aligns it with the suburban space, between the intellectual urban space and the physical rural space; the middlebrow and the suburbs are both criticised for being neither one thing nor the other.

Delafield draws on an established literature of suburbia which, as Lynne Hapgood describes, comprised both satire and hostile criticism as writers attempted to engage with “a qualitatively different kind of social terrain, creating a new kind of culture and consciousness”.⁴ Writers from a range of different cultural and political positions found the suburban problematic; in the pages of *Punch* as much as in the works of Grossmith, Gissing, Wells, and both Woolfs, suburbia is analysed and criticised. Suburban development challenged notions of traditional landscape and cityscape, it challenged the social order through the redistribution of land; access to better housing and improved social status enlarged and diversified the middle classes, disrupting notions of class boundaries and upper-class ascendancy. Critics of suburbia also perceived within it a lack of authenticity;
authentic living was considered to be possible only within the genuine urban or rural worlds. Suburbanites were depicted as small-minded and pretentious; this criticism was a means of controlling and containing fears about a newly emerging class who, in Hapgood’s phrase, “claimed the right to a personal meaning for their lives.” The disruptive qualities and problematic authenticity of suburbia have a close affinity with the characterisation of the middlebrow.

DelafIELD’s novel makes use of typical criticisms of suburbia and its residents that sometimes border on suburban cliche; however, that is not the end of the story. Hapgood points out that, “by offering 'a piece of property and a piece of land that was distinctively one's own and undistinctively like everyone else's', the suburbs manifested outward integration and inward subversion”.

The phrase “outward integration and inward subversion” typifies DelafIELD’s writing, which usually remains conservatively realist both in terms of form and content, but also usually contains subversive cultural or political meaning. DelafIELD integrates her novel with an established literary tradition that is critical of suburbia, but through her account of Peter Jannett’s transition from a definitively middlebrow writer to one who is likely to produce work of literary quality, she subverts the notion that suburbia is inimical to cultural production, and disrupts arguments about the homogeneity and inauthenticity of suburbanites.

At the start of the novel, Peter Jannett has fallen in love with impoverished, upper-class Antoinette Rochester, who works as a secretary in his family’s insurance business. Peter is a published author and is married to Hope, a Scottish woman whom he esteems but does not love; they have twin sons and live in Richford, a composite London suburb. Much of the action of the novel is taken up with discussions between all the parties to this love affair as to whether Peter should divorce Hope and marry Antoinette. Antoinette comes to like and respect Hope, and eventually decides that she should not break up the family home; she and Peter part. Peter accedes to Hope’s request that he play more part in the family business, and he begins to commute to the office but continues to work at his writing, which he believes is improving. At the very end of the novel he hears that Antoinette is to marry Lord Halburton, a wealthy aristocrat some years her senior who is an old friend of her family.

DelafIELD uses typical hostile or satirical depictions of suburbia extensively to construct Peter’s suburban home and his family. His house is called “The Korner”, spelled with a K, and the opening of the novel places his home firmly in a literary construct of suburban London:

His own house was in a quiet street off the High Street. It had a roof with red tiles and leaded window-panes. Its name was 'The Korner' but it really stood last but three in the long row of red-tiled, lead-windowed villas. He pushed open the rustic wooden gate and went up the narrow flagged path [...] Fumed oak, Dutch pottery, green-framed reproductions of famous pictures, rush-seated chairs, and the clean,
clear folds of net curtains – orange and blue – at the windows. That – and in winter the winking gleam of well-polished brass lying decorous and unused on the green tiles that formed so smooth and glazed an expanse, surrounding the distorted pallor of a gas-fire”.

Delafield’s description chimes with critique of suburbia as a pseudo-rural location, dwelling on its rustic gate and lead windows, but also emphasises its lack of authenticity: the misspelt name, the fact that it is not actually on a corner, the unused brass implements kept purely for show, and the gas fire instead of a real fire, all indicate that there is something fake at the heart of this home. The description conveys notions of suburban design and taste as superficial, the glossy surface more important than authenticity. The composite name of Peter’s suburb – Richford – also draws on the homogenous nature of suburbia as constructed by other writers. The text repeatedly insists on the smallness of suburbia, literally and figuratively; Peter’s sitting room is “slightly over-crowded because it was very small”; the stairs are “narrow” and the Jannetts are “cramped for space”. Peter’s wife Hope’s ambitions are equally small and limited to the familial and the domestic. Hope herself typifies a fictional stereotype of the suburban woman as utterly committed to domesticity; her effective housekeeping marks out the Korner as a typically feminised suburban domain. The novel does, however, valorise Hope, particularly through Antoinette’s admiration of her prowess as mother and homemaker, and of her strength and generosity as she deals with a crisis in her marriage.

The most hostile description of suburban life in the novel is attached to Peter’s sister-in-law, Norah. Peter describes her as “slovenly, selfish, greedy, sensual and, in spite of a certain vulgar sharpness of tongue that might pass for quick-wittedness, essentially and irredeemably stupid”. This thoroughly negative characterisation is borne out by the narrative. Norah shares none of Hope’s feminine suburban concern for domesticity and does not “know or care if her house was dirty, so long as there were blazing fires in the sitting-rooms and hot abundant food on the table.”. She appears utterly uncultured: her only interest in Peter’s books is in how much money they make; taken to the cinema, she is more interested in the box of chocolates she has been given than the film. She aspires to a higher class status, asserting to Antoinette that the Jannett family home is “simply centuries old” and that the Jannetts themselves have been in Richford for “donkey’s years”. Delafield includes several physical descriptions of Norah, all of which emphasise her unattractive qualities. At a dinner party, her dress is a flounced “exaggeration of the one worn by her favourite revue actress”; her pearls are “a shade too magnificent to be convincing”. Her voice is variously described as “shrill” and “strident”. Norah is overweight and usually has her mouth full; at home, she reverts to slovenly type, warming her feet on the fender with “her knees wide apart, her short skirt pulled up well above them, revealing bulging calves and the edges of a frayed pair of blue stockinette knickers.”. She is a grotesque stereotype of the vulgar suburban woman, intent on consumption, with a superficial glamour that hides the grubby reality underneath. Interested only in what she can eat, buy or show off to
others, she embodies the inauthenticity that Delafield also ascribes to her suburban surroundings.

Through Antoinette’s ventures into suburbia, and retreats to her own upper-class milieu, Delafield is able to contrast the Jannetts’ suburban home repeatedly with the upper-class houses and rooms Antoinette frequents. Antoinette has no real home of her own and when the novel opens is living at her club; her impecunious mother, Lady Rochester, lives with her brother Lord Valerian in Cavendish Square, and Antoinette eventually goes to live there at her mother’s request. Cavendish Square is the antithesis of The Korner, a place of spaciousness and luxury:

> It was a relief to sink wearily into the large four-post bed, between the ancient fragrant linen sheets and the blankets that bore in faded red marking a monogram and a date more than fifty years old. The weeks that Antoinette had lived at her club had taught her to appreciate the luxury of space as she had never done before.¹⁴

The description of upper-class rooms and homes in the novel, whether urban or rural, emphasise the great age of the properties and their contents, reinforcing the importance of tradition and authenticity as much in furnishings as in individuals. Earl Willows, where Antoinette will eventually make her home after her marriage, is definitively, authentically old and undeniably large. The hall is “vast, oak-panelled [...] a big fire roared in an open hearth [...] pot-plants filled every corner and a glass bowl of Malmaison carnations stood on a side table”.¹⁵ Antoinette herself notes the difference between the rooms at Earl Willows and at the Korner. Her mother’s room has “panelled walls, rose-red velvet curtains [...] and shining, inlaid Buhl furniture. Her own room [...] was scarcely less attractive. Rosewood took the place of Buhl, and the apple-green of the silk curtains was repeated in the Aubusson carpet. Antoinette sat down before the little gilt Empire mirror on the dressing-table and looked at the leaping firelight on the green-tiled open hearth, and had a sudden aching vision of Peter in the room that she had seen at ‘The Korner’.”¹⁶ This passage serves to emphasise the authenticity of upper-class space at Earl Willows, with its real fire and enduring, antique furniture; but it also subversely demonstrates both that upper-class and suburban rooms can be described and understood by the reader by the use of a few key terms. A suburban room can be constructed through references to net curtains, smallness, and gas fires; a country-house room through references to velvet, real fires, space and antique furniture. The narrative exposes, through Antoinette’s recollection, the way in which both spaces are literary constructs.

The novel’s juxtaposition of members of different class groups also exposes and tests the boundaries of the upper and middle classes. The novel’s title comes from the satirical way in which Antoinette’s mother characterises Peter: a “suburban young man” is a powerless figure, unlikely to disrupt her daughter’s life. Lady Rochester reminds Antoinette persistently that love across the class boundary is not advisable: “Of course, if he’s married already [...] it’s simply foolish, but if he wasn’t married it would actually be criminal”.¹⁷ Lady

Tanya Izzard
Writing out of suburbia: E.M. Delafield’s *Suburban Young Man*
Rochester’s comments are meant to be funny, and her daughters laugh at them; Delafield uses humour to demonstrate the entrenched class position Lady Rochester holds, and her firm belief that the classes should not mix.

Lord Halberton (who has an agenda, since he goes on to marry Antoinette) also advises her against the relationship: “it goes against the grain, all this new-fashioned business of being hail-fellow-well-met with any Tom, Dick and Harry [...] It’s just a chance, depending on the individual, whether they behave decently or not. But the tradition isn’t there – you can’t take anything for granted.” 18 Halberton invokes the idea of a code of upper-class behaviour which will ensure that even on the edge of adultery, a gentleman will behave well. The sub-plot of the novel, however, undermines Halberton’s belief; Antoinette’s sister Sheila has an upper-class married lover quite prepared to take her away to Paris for the weekend, despite the likely cost to her reputation.

Antoinette herself often finds her excursions into middle-class society difficult. At the office, she is sometimes offended by Sydney’s ungentlemanly behaviour; when invited to the Jannetts for dinner, “Antoinette wondered how they would get through the evening, which seemed to stretch ahead in an interminable succession of disconnected platitudes and of tedious jocularities”. 19 Antoinette contrasts this awkward party with a dinner given by her uncle: “These people – her own people – did not talk about themselves [...]. Their conversation might be tedious, but without the triple tediousness of egotism.” 20 Antoinette is willing to be “democratic” as she describes it, and to continue to assert that good things can come from suburbia, but she is unable to accommodate a mode of social discourse different from the one she is used to hearing, even while she acknowledges that both modes are equally dull.

For the most part, Delafield’s novel confirms an existing critical, satirical model of suburbia as inauthentic, consumerist and excessively feminised. Antoinette’s pioneering explorations of this strange middle-class world merely serve to confirm to her the superiority of upper-class places and habits. However, this depiction is complicated by the position of Peter as a writer and the development of his work throughout the novel. Peter’s writing is characterised at the outset of the novel as hack-work. He considers he has the ability to “string words together to make up a yarn of sorts, and that’s about all”. 21 It is suggested that Peter avoids emotional honesty in his writing because he knows he is emotionally limited by his marriage to Hope, and that he over-value his earning potential: “Peter was not proud of his books, although he was proud of making an income out of them.” 22 This characterisation aligns him with Leavis’s middlebrow writers, producing only what will sell without consideration of literary value. Cassidy, Peter’s editor, consistently reiterates his belief that Peter is capable of better work, considering his current writing is “immature” and in need of a genuine emotional experience in order to improve. Taken together with Cassidy’s other frequently expressed view, that Peter is out of place in the suburbs, this can
be read as an endorsement of the idea that suburban lives and emotions are inauthentic – or at least insufficiently authentic to generate good writing.

In his suburban environment, Peter’s writing is generally viewed as not a real job for a man. Hope is supportive to an extent but would prefer her husband to undertake a more usual form of suburban work:

She thought it a pity he should write books when he might have a job in the prosperous and respectable family business.23 ‘The way [Norah’s] talked – as if you were content to sit at home day after day playing at work whilst other men went out and made a living.’ […] She found something faintly contemptible in a man whose work implied sitting at home at his desk, day after day, instead of sitting at a desk in someone else’s office.’24

Peter’s work, conducted at home, restricts him to the domestic, suburban, feminine space that Hope sees as her own domain, at least during the daytime; he is emasculated by the location of his work and his failure to engage with the world of business like his suburban peers. His work is variously considered by his suburban family as unmanly, lazy and pointless except that it enables him to earn money. Cassidy – ironically, given his profession as sub-editor of a cheap magazine that publishes serial stories – is the only champion of the literary value of Peter’s writing.

It is Cassidy who begins to suggest that Antoinette can help improve Peter’s work: “he’s never known a woman of discrimination yet, and he can’t do without sympathy, any more than any other creative artist”.25 Cassidy’s position reinforces the idea that good writing cannot emerge from the suburban environment, and that it is Antoinette’s cultural capital – her “discrimination” - as well as her affection that will help Peter produce better work. However, this reinforcement is complicated by Cassidy’s liminal position as a suburbanite by location and a foreigner by birth. It is difficult for the reader to evaluate whether Cassidy has sufficient cultural capital to judge Peter’s work; he is associated with the middle- to lowbrow end of fiction publishing, and Antoinette considers him “semi-educated [and] semi-intellectual”.26 Antoinette herself also complicates this; she enjoys talking to Cassidy about books, however limited she considers his intellect to be, because her own social circle is decidedly not intellectual. Antoinette’s cultural capital consists of the ideas and expectations of her class position which create “discrimination” and refinement, rather than any particular understanding of literature. It is not her cultural capital that will rescue Peter’s writing; instead, the authenticity of their love, and her noble rejection of him, are presented as the origins of his literary improvement.

This idea is reiterated throughout the novel. Antoinette dreams that Peter “gave her a book saying that it was she herself who had written it. ‘No, we did it together,’ she found herself saying”.27 Antoinette, at least unconsciously, has accepted the idea that her love will rescue Peter’s writing. After Antoinette has renounced Peter, Hope tells her that “[Peter’s]
new story will be the best he’s done yet, I shouldn’t wonder” and Cassidy confirms that his “work is improving, and I expect that the new book, if he brings it off, will be a really good thing.”\textsuperscript{28} By the end of the novel, Peter is beginning “to foresee that there would come a time when [...] his writing would become real and vital to him, and he would work at it with a strength and a passion that hitherto he had never achieved.”\textsuperscript{29} The suffering and drama occasioned by his love for Antoinette have given him access to a greater emotional authenticity which he would not have acquired had he remained within his suburban boundary.

The conclusion of the narrative is resolutely conservative. Antoinette renounces Peter and agrees to marry her rich and titled suitor. Peter, reconciled with Hope and newly appreciative of her strength and generosity, accedes to her desire that he take a more active part in the family business, travelling up to the office in the city. Peter has conformed more strongly to the suburban type by parting with Antoinette and taking a more appropriate job. However, he is simultaneously expecting to be able to create work of greater literary quality that he genuinely values. He has come to a greater appreciation and understanding of his wife’s merits. He has, in Hapgood’s phrase, claimed the right to personal meaning in his life. The irony of Peter’s position, in which greater suburban conformity co-exists with aesthetic development, subverts the notion that suburban values are inimical to good writing, and undermines the apparent conservatism of the novel’s plot. However, this subversion is undermined in turn by the importance of upper-class Antoinette to his development, the complex position of Cassidy as an arbiter of literary quality, and the novel’s generally negative depiction of an inauthentic suburbia.

Todd Kutcha suggests that representations of suburbia have been reduced, through the ascendancy of modernism, to "little more than a footnote to literary history - one filled with forgotten texts of dubious merit".\textsuperscript{30} DelafIELD’s novel is not only a footnote in Leavis’s model of the middlebrow, but was something of a footnote in her own writing; she regretted publishing the book, considering it of dubious merit herself, and never returned to the theme of suburbia.\textsuperscript{31} However, DelafIELD does make extensive use of ironic subversion within an essentially conservative narrative, allowing her to explore, sometimes by stealth, more radical political ideas than can easily be assimilated by a middlebrow text. DelafIELD would go on to write many more novels that fit easily into the category of the middlebrow, preserving a superficial conservatism but advancing subversive political arguments, maintaining the “outward integration and inward subversion” that characterises her fiction.

\footnotesize
1 Leavis, Q. D. Fiction and the Reading Public (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932) p210

Lynne Hapgood, Margins of Desire: the suburbs in fiction and culture 1880-1925 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) p4

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p11

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p220

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p90

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p112

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p64

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p82

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p104

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p20

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) pp20-21

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p269

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p72

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p117

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p133

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p197

E.M. Delafield, The Suburban Young Man (London: Hutchinson, 1928) p276

Kutchta, Todd, Semi-Detached Empire: Suburbia and the Colonisation of Britain, 1880 to the Present (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010) p11

E.M. Delafield, “A Note by the Way”, in Ten Contemporaries: Notes towards their definitive bibliography by John Gawsworth, (London: Joiner and Steele, 1937) p122