

**REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND ASPECTS OF THEIR AGENCY  
IN MALE AUTHORED PROLETARIAN EXPERIMENTAL NOVELS  
FROM THIRTIES AMERICA**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates the layered representations of women, their agency, and their class awareness in four leftist experimental novels from 1930s America: Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited*, John Dos Passos' *The Big Money*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It argues that the histories these novels engage, the forms they integrate, and the societal norms they explore enable their writers to offer a complex, distinct, sense of female representation and agency. All four novels present stereotyped or sentimentalised portrayals of women from the traces of early twentieth-century popular culture, a presentation which the novels' stories explore through nuanced, mobilised, or literally as well as figuratively politicised images of women. In order to investigate these representations, I read each novel within its associated cultural context. I also employ feminist and cultural historians' ideas about women's complex roles in 1930s America and earlier decades; cultural historians' arguments about the decade's documentary culture and its popular modes of expression; and literary historians' arguments about the blending of modernist form and leftist content in the decade's proletarian writings. The study contends that in their various and always changing representations of women these novels explore a spectrum of female agency within the sphere of proletarian politics and challenge the gendered conventions predominant in early twentieth-century America.

## DEDICATION

It satisfies the heart and soul of mine,  
to dedicate this work in a rhythmic line,  
to you Mom and Dad, for a key real sign:  
Your trust

incites

my success

to shine!

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>NWL</i>	<i>Not Without Laughter</i>
<i>HH</i>	<i>Home to Harlem</i>
<i>IM</i>	<i>Invisible Man</i>
<i>TD</i>	<i>The Disinherited</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>Love On the Dole</i>
<i>42<sup>nd</sup></i>	<i>The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel</i>
<i>TBM</i>	<i>The Big Money</i>
<i>TGW</i>	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Now in November</i>
<i>TF</i>	<i>The Foundry</i>
<i>TG</i>	<i>The Girl</i>
<i>TGG</i>	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>

## INTRODUCTION

How it grieves the heart of a mother,

You every one must know,

But we can't buy for our children

Our wages are too low.

[...]

But for us nor them, dear workers,

The bosses do not care.

But understand, all workers,

Our union they do fear;

Let's stand together, workers,

And have a union here.<sup>1</sup>

Grace Lumpkin's novel *To Make My Bread* (1932) interpolates the above ballad, 'The Mill Mother's Lament' by strike organiser Ella May Wiggins,<sup>2</sup> and describes in a third-person narrative the 1929 Gastonia textile mill strike, which propelled the political activity of working-class mothers. Bonnie McClare, this novel's female protagonist, is her family's breadwinner and the mother of five children. She works in the mill, helps organise a strike, writes the above ballad, and eventually is murdered during a strike. Comparable to Wiggins,<sup>3</sup> Bonnie is a type of female character who displays agency in emotional, domestic, and political spheres, and this likely has to do with the fact that she was written by a female proletarian author. This thesis focuses not on the representation of women by women as in

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<sup>1</sup> Ella May Wiggins, 'The Mill Mother's Lament', in *American Folksongs of Protest*, ed. by John Greenway (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), pp. 251-2.

<sup>2</sup> See Grace Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 345-6.

<sup>3</sup> See Jennifer A. Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism: Narrative Appropriation in American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 23-58 (p. 30).



Lumpkin's novel, but turns to male novelists of the period to consider ways in which four proletarian-experimental texts from the 1930s address layers of women's autonomy, agency, sentimentalisation, and stereotypicality.

In 1936, three years after the publication of Lumpkin's novel, John Dos Passos, a centrist-leftist novelist and professional modernist writer, included a version of the 'Mill Mother's Lament' in his novel *The Big Money*. It appears in one of the later Newsreels – the documentary pieces which display popular songs, news headlines, and advertisements – which occurs in the novel. Within the poem's ultimate integration, in this last experimental volume of the popular proletarian trilogy *U.S.A.* (1930-1936), Dos Passos challenges gendered conventions and tries to emancipate working women from sexist paradigms and to affirm female proletarian agency in the prose of his novel. This thesis focuses on Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933), Dos Passos' *The Big Money*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), investigating these novels' representations of women and analysing how their portrayals of women's autonomy and political agency are facilitated by the novels' contents, forms, and associated historical contexts.

Literary critical responses to proletarian literature have tended to characterise male proletarian novelists as one-dimensional or problematic in their representation of women.<sup>4</sup> For example, Barbara Foley, in her study of proletarian literature, argues that 'Even when they wished to project honorific portraits of class-conscious women, male-authored proletarian novels at times encoded denigrating assumptions about women's roles and

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<sup>4</sup> These studies include Paula Rabinowitz, 'Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism', in *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940*, eds. by Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), pp. 1-16; Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1993); Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 107-142; and Josep M. Armengol, 'Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the Male Body in 1930s American Culture and Literature', *Journal of Gender Studies* 23.1 (2014), pp. 59-68.

capacities’.<sup>5</sup> This thesis aims not to deny the presence of such limiting representations of women in 1930s leftist culture generally or in specific proletarian texts, but to show that there is evidence of various portrayals of female agency in proletarian novels with lyrical, documentary, and narrative elements by 1930s American male writers with leftist leanings. In the four chosen novels, stereotypical or reductive representations of women exist, but by reading the novels closely, and especially by taking into account their structural elements as well as their proletarian content and associated cultural contexts, a more nuanced sense of female representation and agency emerges.

This thesis is a series of literary case studies, and it amalgamates relevant 1930s proletarian and cultural contexts whenever possible. The order of its four chapters, which are on *Not Without Laughter*, *The Disinherited*, *The Big Money*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, is based on each novel’s year of publication. These novels respond to and build on one another in an emerging discourse in which the ideas of how to write about working-class people, the circumstances of their struggles, and the perception of women change during the 1930s. The study moves chronologically from early 1930s semi-autobiographical and less modernist proletarian novels towards later 1930s ‘collective’ and more experimental novels.<sup>6</sup> Each of these novels appeared in different years and present working-class experience from the 1930s or earlier, and through weaving together narration and other modes of expression, such as lyrical or documentary sections, each novel portrays versions of women and of their proletarian awareness and agency. To account for these disparate representations, this study considers the historical contexts specific to each novel and draws in relevant cultural elements. It employs feminist historians’ arguments about the ambivalent position of women

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<sup>5</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Foley classifies the decade’s proletarian novel into four kinds (fictional autobiography, bildungsroman, social, and collective). She regards ‘collective novels’ as literary texts about masses of people, displaying a large number of documentary segments and inducing the reader to link the segments to the fictional narrative in order to reach a total meaning from the novel. See Foley, *Radical Representations*, pp. 400-2.

in the first decades of twentieth-century America;<sup>7</sup> cultural historians' ideas about the burial of women's issues in the 1930s;<sup>8</sup> and critics' questions about the decade's artistic means of expression and documentary writings.<sup>9</sup> The study also integrates literary historical views about the fusion of modernism and radicalism in the decade's proletarian fiction,<sup>10</sup> feminist ideas about women's representation in proletarian literature,<sup>11</sup> and studies about the chosen novels in particular.

The first two chapters, on Hughes' and Conroy's novels, are closely connected. *Not Without Laughter* contains blues lyrics which present stereotyped African American proletariat women, but the novel's third-person narrative, which is about the development of a boy into an intellectual, complicates this presentation due to the political awareness that the boy's female relatives demonstrate. Similarly, *The Disinherited* integrates popular songs that offer negative or sentimentalised portrayals of women in general and Irish American women in particular. However, the novel's first-person episodic narrative opposes these

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<sup>7</sup> These key secondary sources include Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-30* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979); Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Susan Ware, *Holding their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982); and Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> These studies include Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997); and Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> These studies include Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper, 1973); David P. Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987); Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994); Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretations of Modern American Prose Literature* (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1995); Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: WW. Norton, 2009); and Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> These sources include Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, eds., *Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 1982); Foley, *Radical Representations*; James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Steven C. Tracy, *Historical Guide to Langston Hughes* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> These studies include Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Rabinowitz, 'Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism', in *Writing Red*, 1-16; Janet Galligani Casey, *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction*, ed. by Casey (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2004); and Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011).

representations as it traces a male protagonist's proletarian affiliation and women's direct and indirect involvement in this advancement. Both lyrical-narrative proletarian novels represent polarised images of marginalised working women in America. *The Big Money*, examined in Chapter Three, provides wider, more dialectical, and mobilised images of working and political American women from the 1910s-1930s through a combination of modernist devices, including the lyrical, documentary, and narrative sections. Dos Passos uses these devices in earlier 1930s novels, as well, including the first two volumes of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (1930) and *1919* (1932), which predate *The Big Money*. Chapter Four looks at Steinbeck's use of documentary writings about Dust Bowl migration in *The Grapes of Wrath* and his representation of symbolic and dynamic Dust Bowl women and their cooperation with those in need. Finally, I move from this analysis into a conclusion suggesting how comparable close reading of other 1930s proletarian novels which feature similar elements might open up further lines of enquiry. These include consideration of the layered nature of *male* agency; the question of what kind of action such novels demanded from their audience; and the possibility of relating such texts to the twentieth-century history of feminism.

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The different representations of women and female agency presented in the four chosen novels were in part shaped by the changing cultural politics of the left during the 1930s. The development of 1930s left culture included many cultural and social shifts which Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck were certainly aware of. These shifts include the Communist Party's encouragement in the early 1930s of stylistically plain writing about proletarian experiences to trigger men's protest against social injustices,<sup>12</sup> whereas after

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Gold, 'Go Left, Young Writers!', in *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology*, eds. by Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), pp. 382-3.

1935, writers were more likely to use the modernist style to address proletarian issues.<sup>13</sup> Other examples are the decrease in men's employment juxtaposed with an increase in women's entrance to public, political, and labour spheres,<sup>14</sup> and women's engagement with cultural means of escapism<sup>15</sup> as well as with documentary modes of expression,<sup>16</sup> which had become popular by the decade's close. These social and historical changes seemed to cause a shift within the Communist Party (CPUSA).<sup>17</sup> By the end of the 1930s, as the CPUSA's focus shifted to combatting Fascism (the European non-democratic philosophy),<sup>18</sup> it presented a less radical rhetoric and ideology.<sup>19</sup> All of these factors worked to shape the way Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck represent women in the four examined novels.

In 1930s America, the proletariat witnessed well known social upheavals like increased poverty and lack of men's employment, the lynching of falsely convicted (predominately African American) people, and agrarian disasters followed by migrations from one region to another with the aim of finding better lives.<sup>20</sup> Men were societally expected to fix or, at least, react to these struggles. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, which provided financial support for farmers and the unemployed yet which did very little regarding the lynching, were attempts to alleviate some of these conditions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, p. 1; Foley, *Radical Representations*, 86-128 (pp. 109-10); Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115-159 (p. 117).

<sup>14</sup> See Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times, 1984), 340-49; 170-97; Armengol, 'Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the Male Body in 1930s American Culture and Literature', 59-68.

<sup>15</sup> Currell, *The March of Spare Time*, 1-11.

<sup>16</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 152-156.

<sup>17</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463.

<sup>18</sup> Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. 212; Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 448).

<sup>20</sup> See Edmund Lindop and Margaret Goldstein, *America in the 1930s* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2010); McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, pp. 323-49; Walter T. Howard, ed., *Black Communists Speak on Scottsboro: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007); Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979); James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 522-530 (p. 526).

Other means were either radical – as exemplified in the proletariat’s militant activism, through organising strikes and revolutions, against social injustices<sup>22</sup> – or progressive – like reviving late nineteenth-century American ideals (for example, the myth about self-made man Abraham Lincoln which Roosevelt took as a base to bolster his plans).<sup>23</sup> Notably, in 1933, the year in which Roosevelt initiated the New Deal, his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, published *It’s Up to the Women*, a book which makes the case for the necessity of American women’s contributions to their country’s recovery from economic, social and political crises. Mrs Roosevelt writes,

[W]omen know that life must go on and that the need of life must be met and it is their courage and determination which, time and again, have pulled us through worse crisis than the present one.<sup>24</sup>

The decade’s proletarian literature does not neglect the ‘courage and determination’ Mrs Roosevelt attributes to women here. More specifically, this study’s chosen novels, which present social dilemmas from the decade or earlier times, engage women’s proletarian awareness and sometimes their agency despite the gendered strictures predominant at that time. This introduction will now set out the critical material relevant to the subsequent chapters, and discuss how these ideas will be employed in the study. It will then situate the study within the relevant critical scholarship on the decade’s proletarian literature.

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While working on their proletarian novels, Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck adhered to the broad leftist goal of writing about class consciousness, intending to spur their readers to take action. In the early 1930s, Hughes and Conroy, although not Communist Party members, contributed to the left-wing magazine, *New Masses*, which aimed at finding justice

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<sup>22</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 423-462 (p. 425).

<sup>23</sup> See Alfred Haworth Jones, ‘The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era’, *American Quarterly* 23. 5 (1971), pp. 710-724; Philip Abbott, *The Exemplary Presidency: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American Political Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 3-21 (p. 10; 20).

<sup>24</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *It’s Up to the Women* (New York: Fredrick A. Stokes Company, 1933), p. ix.

for the marginalised white and African American proletariat.<sup>25</sup> While Dos Passos stopped writing for *New Masses* by the mid-thirties, and while he broke from the Communist Party in 1935 due to his lack of confidence in its effectiveness at achieving social justice for everyone,<sup>26</sup> he continued to hold broadly left-wing views until later years of the 1930s. Steinbeck wrote essays for documentary projects sponsored by the government to show proletarian agrarian struggles without calling for the radicalism encouraged by the Communist Party in the early 1930s.<sup>27</sup> With the leftist affiliations of the authors in mind, it is clear that a shared purpose emerges in *Not Without Laughter*, *The Disinherited*, *The Big Money*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*: to underline the agency of women in spite of restricting sexist expectations and traditional assumptions about gender roles in proletarian contexts.

The narratives of these four novels seek to reveal the invisible and complex roles of women within the contexts of proletarian struggles, which feminist historians of 1930s America help to illuminate. Angela Y. Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, contends that African American blues women, such as ‘Ma’ Rainey and Bessie Smith, sang lyrics that ‘addressed urgent social issues and helped to shape collective modes of black consciousness’.<sup>28</sup> Susan Ware points out that even if American women as a group could not have ended the Depression by themselves, their country ‘could never have survived the 1930s without women’s collective contributions’.<sup>29</sup> Ware explains that leftist journalists like Mary Heaton Vorse, Josephine Herbst, and Meridel Le Sueur; and Communist Party women like

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<sup>25</sup> See Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 185-209 (189; 198); Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Plays to 1942*, ed. by Leslie Sanders and Nancy Johnston (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 5, 116-129 (pp. 128-9); Benoit Tadie, ‘The Masses Speak’, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: North America*, vol ii, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 832-56.

<sup>26</sup> One of Dos Passos’ key leftist publications *New Masses* reprinted in 1936. See Dos Passos, ‘They Are Dead Now’, *New Masses* (August 1936), p. 24; Granville Hicks, ‘The Politics of John Dos Passos’, *The Antioch Review* 10. 1 (1950), pp. 85-98.

<sup>27</sup> See Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, pp. 92-101; Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 92-153 (p. 125).

<sup>28</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xi-xx (p. xiv).

<sup>29</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (p. 1).

Ella Reeve ‘Mother’ Bloor and Peggy Dennis helped distract Americans from challenges like poverty and unemployment.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, as Ware and other historians articulate in separate studies, the decade’s leftist agent women, whether reporters or Communist Party members, were not freed from domestic duties.<sup>31</sup> Even the Irish American strike organiser known as Mother Jones, and the self-sacrificing striker Ella May Wiggins were mothers and took care of their homes as well as working for justice.<sup>32</sup> This thesis utilises these and similar realities about 1930s women while analysing the different forms of labour which the female characters in the novels undertake, such as domestic service, blues singing, farming, acting, journalistic writing, protesting with Communist Party members, and picking cotton. Through work and activism, the fictionalised women encode or decode radical, collective, or feminised inclinations to resist proletarian or gendered conditions.

In the early twentieth-century America, in order to keep their jobs and for other reasons, working women sought control over their bodies,<sup>33</sup> and the rejection of pregnancies and the choice of abortions frequently appear in the period’s cultural production as examples of attaining this form of empowerment. The four novels explore these experiences in different ways. For example, working outside the domestic sphere empowers single women in the narratives of the first two novels to cast off sexist expectations. It, also, albeit indirectly

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<sup>30</sup> See *Holding their Own*, 141-170; 117-136.

<sup>31</sup> See Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy, eds., ‘Mary Heaton Vorse’, *American Working-Class Literature*, 377-80 (p. 377); Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970), pp. 30-1; Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby, eds., *America’s Working Women: A Documentary History-1600 to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 263; Charlotte Nekola, ‘Political Women Journalists and the 1930s’, in *Writing Red*, 189-98 (p. 193; 195); Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp. 272-84; Kathleen Brown, ‘The “Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World” of the Communist Party, U.S.A.: Feminism, Maternalism, and ‘Mother Bloor’’, *Feminist Studies* 25.3 (1999), 537-70.

<sup>32</sup> Irving Dilliard, Mary Sue and Dilliard Schusky, ‘Mary Harris Jones’, in *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, eds. by Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, 3 vols (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1971), vol. 2, p. 287; Patrick Huber, ‘Mill Mother’s Lament: Ella May Wiggins and the Gastonia Strike of 1929’, *Southern Cultures* 15.3 (2009), 81-110.

<sup>33</sup> See Carol Hymowitz and Michael Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1978), 285-302 (p. 297); Linda Gordon, ‘Margaret Sanger’, in *Encyclopaedia of the American Left*, eds. by Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 676; Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); 132-159; and Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20.



(through the gendered treatment in their work sphere or the physical burden from their works), helps the pregnant protagonists in the other two novels terminate their pregnancies and reject domestic roles. As feminist and cultural historians point out, the left-wing, which Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos and Steinbeck aligned themselves with, rarely supported women's self-chosen abortions or birth control. Michael Denning contends in his study *The Cultural Front* that the leftist community at that time prioritised the proletariat's struggles over women's concerns.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, in *Red Feminism*, Kate Weigand argues that the 1920s-1930s Communist Party, which aimed at solving classed as well as African American issues, supported, especially late in the third decade, 'women's access to free and legal birth control and abortion', yet these matters were by no means the Communist Party's main concern.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, the notable African American blues women who sang lyrics calling for breaking the bounds of motherhood and wifhood, as Davis contends, were seen as 'primitive' and immoral.<sup>36</sup> I will refer to this and other criticism about blues singing in the chapter on Hughes' novel. Similarly, Weigand's point about women's positions in the Communist Party is integrated into the chapter on Dos Passos' text. Discussions about birth matters are present in the chapters on *The Big Money* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, as in these two novels pregnant women abort or show indifference towards the loss of their babies and so gain release from gendered impositions.

That this form of agency does not appear in the earlier novels *Not Without Laughter* or *The Disinherited*, points to the progression in fictionalised women's liberty and social agency over the course of the 1930s. Cultural historians divide the third decade in relation to its left culture production and cultural politics of literary and artistic types associated with the

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<sup>34</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 3-50 (p. 32).

<sup>35</sup> Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 15-27 (p. 23).

<sup>36</sup> These singers, writes Davis, 'were (and to certain extent still are) associated with the Devil because they celebrated those dimensions of human existence considered evil and immoral according to the tents of Christianity' (*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, p. 124).

decade's Communist Party into two periods: the Third Period and the Popular Front. The former phase, which roughly lasted until 1935, encouraged men's militant activities against capitalism and social injustice.<sup>37</sup> The latter phase, which started in 1936, embraces further inclinations. It turns the radical attitude into a populist mode that includes everyone, according to the earliest Popular Front theorists,<sup>38</sup> toward 'a laboring of American culture' in Denning's view,<sup>39</sup> and into a progressive cultural mode in Morris Dickstein's view.<sup>40</sup> Richard H. Pells maintains that between 1935 and 1939 radicalism started to decline, for unlike in the early 1930s, intellectuals were encouraged by the society and the Communist Party to write about 'people' rather than 'workers' and to stimulate their Americanism instead of radicalism.<sup>41</sup> Writers from the mid-thirties, Pells notes, 'were now encouraged to immerse themselves in the mores and customs of the common man' in addition to avoiding preaching political 'ideologies or formulas'.<sup>42</sup> It would be imprecise to suggest that Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck, none of whom were Communist Party members while working on the novels under examination, directly shaped their novels to accord with the shifts occurring in Communist Party cultural policies.<sup>43</sup> However, the terms 'Third Period' and 'Popular Front', as well as the Communist Party-encouraged ideas detailed above, are utilised in the following chapters because the chosen novels – two of which are from the Third Period and two of which are from the Popular Front phase – embody masked, radical, labouring, progressive, populist, or blended inclinations invoked by fictionalised women. As brief examples, Conroy's 1933 novel ends up with its male protagonist joining a strike after a

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<sup>37</sup> See Rabinowitz, 'Film Noir, Proletarian Literature, and Black Women's Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.1 (2001), 229-254 (p. 232).

<sup>38</sup> See Susman, *Culture as History*, p. 212; Robert Macieski, 'American Writers Congress', in *Encyclopaedia of the American Left*, 33-34 (p. 34).

<sup>39</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115-159 (p. 117).

<sup>40</sup> See Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 448).

<sup>41</sup> Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 310-18 (p. 313); See Foley, *Radical Representations*, 86-128 (pp. 109-10).

<sup>42</sup> Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 310-18 (p. 313).

<sup>43</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 57; 166; 259.

female friend explains to him the revolutionary ideas she learns from reading leftist texts. Steinbeck's 1939 novel closes with a man setting out for non-specified radical activities, but also includes scenes focused on populism and women's agency: a mother's talk about people's strong will to endure their own circumstances, and her daughter's breastfeeding of a starving man. The terms 'Third Period' and 'Popular Front' and their connotations help explain these and other nuanced scenes in the novels.

The four novels present the central fictionalised women as having agency within the cultural sphere through popular means of escapism, such as dancing and singing, listening to the radio, acting, social reading and writing, and attending dances. In *Dancing in the Dark*, Dickstein examines the decade's artistic forms of representation (literature, photographs, movies, dances, songs, and radio programs) and argues that although these devices could not change social problems, they 'offered a stimulus of optimism and energy'.<sup>44</sup> Susan Currell, in *The March of Spare Time*, also maintains that leisure activities such as reading or writing, listening to the radio, or attending dances or movies, function as an indirect answer to the decade's social problems in America. 'Leisure', Currell writes, 'became both a problem and the solution to social and cultural recovery during the Depression'.<sup>45</sup> In Currell's and Dickstein's respective terms, the novels examined in this thesis incorporate 'Leisure' and 'Dancing in the Dark' as modes of expression whose representatives are female characters who attempt to escape, individually and collectively, from social struggles.

All four novels deepen their representation of the central female protagonists by implicating them within aspects of the decade's documentary culture, in which all four novelists were, to varying degrees, involved. Critics of the decade's documentary culture argue that journalists and photographers modified facts to intensify the proletarians' victimisation or resilience with the aim of attracting sympathy for them. Alfred Kazin, who

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<sup>44</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, p. 526.

<sup>45</sup> Currell, *The March of Spare Time*, 1-11 (p. 2).

was among the first literary critics to write about this subject, explains that during the Depression, middle-class reporters and artists were keen to find ‘facts’ about the working class and its struggles, yet their documentaries were sentimentalised, for they ‘tried to depict and failed to master’ reality as it was.<sup>46</sup> Further, the decade’s reporters, David Peeler writes, ‘shaped their observations and melded their reports in accord with their expectations and their attitudes toward theory, especially Marxist theory’.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, documentary photographers, according to Peeler, wanted to document what they saw ‘in hopes of confronting the pressing problems of the 1930s’, a remit whose objectivity is questionable, as the photographers chose specific moments to capture seeking a certain version of reality.<sup>48</sup> William Stott and Paula Rabinowitz also question the facts represented in photo-text books from the decade, including Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor’s *An American Exodus*, and Walker Evans and James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Stott, similarly to Kazin, regards such writings as an attempt to persuade the audience with a ‘reality’ that ‘sentimentalized’ the presented objects.<sup>49</sup> Rabinowitz also argues that these projects, which she describes as ‘part-fiction, part-truth’, are an attempt to represent certain realities about proletarians.<sup>50</sup> Rabinowitz investigates *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as an example and maintains that this project by middle-class observers tries to detach its authors’ ‘subjectivity’ as it presents working-class people from different angles in essays and photographs.<sup>51</sup> The chapters on *The Big Money* and *The Grapes of Wrath* refer to these ideas at certain points.

Dos Passos, in his novel’s central narrative, portrays a female journalist born into a middle-class background who tries to represent proletarians objectively. In *The Grapes of*

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<sup>46</sup> Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 485-518 (p. 489).

<sup>47</sup> Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet*, 13-54 (p. 54).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-96 (p. 96).

<sup>49</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), 46-64 (p. 57).

<sup>50</sup> Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 1-15 (p. 6).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

*Wrath*, Steinbeck modifies journalistic essays about Dust Bowl conditions that he published shortly before writing his novel,<sup>52</sup> trying to highlight women's necessity in the proletarian struggle. Even Hughes and Conroy employ a documentary element in their representation of their central female characters. *Not Without Laughter* displays a segment from an African American proletarian magazine wherein a female blues singer's name appears, and *The Disinherited* sketches an educated female's reading of a leftist photo-text magazine. These and other moments connect the novels under discussion to 1930s visual and textual documentary culture.

Cultural historians have noted a similarity between the decade's documentary writings and its proletarian literature. The latter, which is often critically labeled as 'left[ist]', 'radical', and 'red',<sup>53</sup> is written for and about the working class regardless of its author's social background. Stott observes that proletarian fiction is 'documentary', a 'genre of actuality', for its presentation of working-class hardships aims to show the public the proletarian struggle.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, these works of fiction, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, which Stott offers as an example, presents social problems as 'remediable' and as issues which 'can be changed by human initiative'.<sup>55</sup> As Dickstein points out, the decade's proletarian literature was '[o]ne attempt to grapple directly with social realities'.<sup>56</sup> While attempting to deal with these realities and to offer solutions for proletarian struggles, Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck partly feature female protagonists, sometimes modelled after radical or popular women they knew or knew of, from contexts relevant to their novels. In addition, they

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<sup>52</sup> A series of these essays appears in a 1936 pamphlet, *The Harvest Gypsies*. See Steinbeck's *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to The Grapes of Wrath* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1988).

<sup>53</sup> These labels are respectively used in the titles of books by key critics of proletarian literature: Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* (1977); Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations* (1993); Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954* (1970); Nekola and Rabinowitz's *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (1987).

<sup>54</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, ix-xiv (p. xi).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-25 (p. 21).

<sup>56</sup> Dickstein, 'Depression Culture: The Dream of Mobility', in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. by Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 225-263 (p. 230).

employ symbolic references and allusions. The symbolism is indicated in several ways: through the titles of their novels; the representation of singing, reading, acting, or dancing; direct or indirect references to nineteenth-century men representative of American progressive or radical ideals; big cities as promised lands for women's agency; and symbols like 'red' eyes from crying or 'red' hands from working. In each novel, such words and references signify indirect radicalism or agency embodied by women.

All four novels contain traces of popular culture which absorb or replicate elements of the culture's stereotypical discourse, but at the same time they challenge this stereotyping in their narrative prose. The chapters on *Not Without Laughter* and *The Disinherited* make frequent use of the term 'stereotype', for Hughes and Conroy challenge stereotypes about ethnically marginalised women which appear in their novels' songs. Stuart Hall, theorising about cultural representations, defines stereotypes as fixed images which reduce the represented people's real complicated features.<sup>57</sup> 'Black people', Hall exemplifies, were represented in slavery times in America and Britain based on 'the signifiers of their physical difference – thick lips, fuzzy hair, broad face and nose, and so on'.<sup>58</sup> This process of representation limits the features of these people and, further, prevents opposing meanings from evolving even in later decades.<sup>59</sup> The 'mammies' stereotype, as an example, which was broadly constructed in nineteenth-century America about black housemaids being loyal servants to the whites, continued to appear in cultural representations even after the end of slavery in America.<sup>60</sup> Christopher D. Geist, historically reading stereotypes about African Americans, maintains that stereotypes are images constructed about a group of people and

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<sup>57</sup> 'Stereotyping', writes Hall, reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature'. Stuart Hall, ed., 'The Spectacle of the "Other"', *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 225-285 (p. 257).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 251. See Catherine Clinton, 'Mammy', in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, eds. by Darelne Hine and others (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), vol. 2, 744-46 (p. 744).

those 'attributes' are applied to 'all members of that group or class without any distinction'.<sup>61</sup> Geist rightly remarks, 'Stereotypes pare down and simplify reality [...] Their purpose is to set a group apart from the mainstream'.<sup>62</sup> William H. A. Williams discusses how the Irish in America depicted themselves in their popular songs from the 1820s to the 1920s as major stereotypes constructed about them, and maintains:

An ethnic group struggles to develop its own identity in the face of its stereotypes. No matter how denigrating, the stereotypes cannot be dismissed or overthrown. They can be challenged and faced down, but only slowly and over time. Meanwhile, the group may try to influence its stereotype in positive ways that are still acceptable (or comprehensible) within the mainstream culture.<sup>63</sup>

Hughes' and Conroy's novels display on the surface of their lyrical segments stereotypes which the novelists' female characters act against in the novels' stories.

Reductive representations of women (including the women who work) also appear in *The Big Money's* and *The Grapes of Wrath's* documentary segments, representations which the novels' fictionalised prose explore and eventually defy. As feminist historians affirm, working women's position was gendered in 1930s America. Lois Scharf points out in *To Work and to Wed* that specific forms of labour like domestic service were assigned only to women.<sup>64</sup> Leslie Woodcock Tentler also argues that because of society's prejudice against the nature of women's work and married women's careers in particular, women continued sticking to jobs which were 'generally sex-segregated and relatively low-paying'.<sup>65</sup> Ware exemplifies in her notable study about the 1930s that farm women, especially in the South,

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<sup>61</sup> Christopher D. Geist, 'From the Plantation to the Police Station: A Brief History of Black Stereotypes', in *The Popular Culture Reader*, eds. by C.D. Geist and Jack Nachbar (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 157-170 (p. 159).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>63</sup> William H. A. Williams, *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream: The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 1-12 (p. 3).

<sup>64</sup> Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 86-109 (p. 101).

<sup>65</sup> Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 1-9 (p. 4).

‘had triple responsibilities: the household, childbearing and raising, and actual farm work’.<sup>66</sup>

The integrated documentary segments in Dos Passos’ and Steinbeck’s novels attempt to depict the gradual release of women from similar positions, and in the novels’ stories the two writers go further to introduce working women who are ultimately freed from gendered conventions which associate women with the merely domestic, the adjunctive, and the apolitical.

Hughes’, Conroy’s, Dos Passos’, and Steinbeck’s attempts to grapple with proletarian realities in blended narratives or genres within their novels help them create nuanced representations of women and their activity. To give brief examples, in Hughes’ novel a blues song, recited to a dancing woman, states: ‘A woman down in Georgia/got her two sweet-men confused’ (*NWL*, 39). And, the dancer to this song carries encoded political intentions, for she gradually elevates herself until she becomes a blues singer, enabling her to earn enough money to start to finance her nephew’s education. Similarly, in Conroy’s novel, a female lover in a song interpolated within the novel waits for a marriage proposal from a man who looks for a working opportunity: ‘Bobby Shafto’s gone to sea/[...]/ He’ll come back and marry me’ (*TD*, 97). In the novel’s story, however, a female friend encourages her lover to join radical activities, illustrating that the narrative’s females are active while their lyrical counterparts remain passive. In Dos Passos’ novel, one of the interpolated ads displays numerous job opportunities for women which are limited to low-paying domestic and social service spheres, and closes with the line: ‘WE HAVE HUNDREDS OF POSITIONS OPEN’ (*TBM*, 855). In contrast, one of the novel’s central female characters drifts from one such role to another until she joins protests and prioritises her work on radical issues over individualised concerns. Finally, one of *The Grapes of Wrath*’s late inter-chapters about Dust Bowl migrants picking cotton states, ‘The ol’ woman’ll make some nice biscuits tonight, ef

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<sup>66</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (p. 9).



she ain't too tired' (*TGW*, 557), and in the novel's story a young female character joins the picking cotton work. Eventually, the tiredness attributed to this work frees this protagonist from domestic chores, and, further, contributes to her stillbirth, which is followed by her breastfeeding a hungry man. In each of these novels, the narrative scenes complement, widen, or even contradict what appear in the interpolated segments. Connecting these and other scenes in each of these novels helps to reveal the various representations of women that Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck present through the structures of their novels.

The extra-narrative segments in the four novels present social circumstances that the novels' fictional scenes attempt to resolve, and the conveying of political issues in this way reflects the kind of modernism the decade's leftist culture absorbs by the mid-thirties. In the study *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, Jeff Allred regards the 'fragmentation' of facts in the decade's photo-text projects 'as a figure, not of failure or omission, but of germination'.<sup>67</sup> Allred considers documentarian writers as modernists, for they use their imagination to construct '*plausible fictions of the real*'.<sup>68</sup> James F. Murphy, in *The Proletarian Moment*, refers to articles published in magazines like *New Masses* and the *Partisan Review*, and discusses the decade's debate between its key leftist critics (such as Mike Gold, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, and James T. Farrell) over the relationship between left politics and forms of aesthetic experimentation in the decade's proletarian literature. Gold, one of the decade's most important proletarian novelists and theorists and the editor of *New Masses*, in his article 'Go Left, Young Writers!' (1929), encourages writers to focus on leftism and revolution. Gold wants the writer of such literature to be a 'Red' man who is born in a working-class family:

He is a Red but has few theories [...] Do not be passive. Write. Your life in mine, mill and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world: Tell us about it in the

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<sup>67</sup> Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, 3-25 (p. 10).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. Italics in original.

same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature—it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle.<sup>69</sup>

However, from the mid-thirties until the close of the decade, this early leftist enthusiasm for straightforward worker testimony was not maintained, for there was a call to write like modernists rather than as leftists or Communists.<sup>70</sup> Murphy explains that the decade's proletarian critics, including Gold himself, in the Communist Party *Daily Worker* newspaper started to urge intellectuals to use modernist techniques, the style which they previously left out as they pursued political propaganda and a didactic emphasis on radical conversion in their proletarian writings.<sup>71</sup> While the novels under examination align with leftist politics, they interweave elements of reportage and documentary as well as song lyrics, poetry, newspaper headlines and advertising slogans with prose stories. By using this modernist structure, their narrative stories respond to these other segments, which often portray stereotyped and less politicised representations of women.

Literary historians note the fusion between leftist content and modernist structure in literature from the 1930s. Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, in the introduction to their edited collection, *Literature at the Barricades*, maintain that the American writings of the 1930s are not only reflections of the decade's social circumstances or of their writers' political and ideological perceptions. These writings also carry artistic and modernistic features from earlier decades:

Most of the writers who turned left during the 1930s were molded in a different age.

Their thinking and sensibilities were forged during the 1920s and earlier, and many of

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<sup>69</sup> Gold, 'Go Left, Young Writers!', in *American Working-Class Literature*, pp. 382-3.

<sup>70</sup> Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> See *Ibid.*, 122-5.

them were deeply influenced by the modernist writers and experience as well as by the breakdown of Victorian values and assumptions.<sup>72</sup>

Steven C. Tracy, in his reading of Hughes' writings published during 1935-1949, contends that 'One of the most notable, and most noted, features of Popular Front aesthetics is a conscious mixing of genres and media— of "high" and "low," of "popular" and "literary," of Whitman and Eliot, of folk culture and mass culture, of literary and nonliterary documents'.<sup>73</sup> From a broader standpoint, in *Radical Representations*, Barbara Foley sees that while there was general agreement that 'proletarian literature should present primarily if not exclusively the life of the proletariat', this does not prevent intellectuals from engaging with the themes and styles of modernism.<sup>74</sup> Referring to Gold's call for creating a 'new' form of writing for the working class, she elucidates that 'much Depression-era literary radicalism was intimately involved in the project of "mak[ing] it new" [...] The literary proletarians were *part* of modernism'.<sup>75</sup> Dos Passos and Steinbeck, whose novels appeared after 1935, and even Conroy and Hughes, who published their novels in early 1930s, blend *bildungsroman* and *picaresque* narrative forms as well as other genres in order to address proletarian issues from different angles.

Hughes, an experimental-modernist poet,<sup>76</sup> writes a blues-prose novel about the development of an African American boy into an intellectual in spite of the dangers and challenges facing him, including the common threat of lynching and the lack of decent employment. Conroy, referred to as a "worker-writer" by his biographer Douglas Wixson, described himself as a writer who spent his time working without thinking about how to

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<sup>72</sup> Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, eds., 'Introduction', in *Literature at the Barricades*, 1-10 (p. 3). Writers like Dos Passos, James Farrell, William Faulkner, Henry Roth, and Steinbeck, Bogardus and Hobson point out, are not only realists or radicals but also 'modernist[s]' (p. 4).

<sup>73</sup> Tracy, *Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, 141-181 (p. 158).

<sup>74</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 86-128 (pp. 109-10).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-85 (p. 62). Italics in original.

<sup>76</sup> See Seth Moglen, 'Modernism in the Black Diaspora: Langston Hughes and the Broken Cubes of Picasso', *Callaloo*, 25.4 (2002), 1189-1205.

write;<sup>77</sup> nevertheless, his novel about poverty and unemployment contains elements of modernism – through songs integrated to episodic sketches – and traces a male protagonist’s evolution into a revolutionary. Dos Passos, a modernist who had a radical agenda, and who regarded professional writing as important as ‘a scientific discovery and invention’ for its ‘ability to influence subsequent thought’, produces a structurally and thematically sophisticated novel about social injustices.<sup>78</sup> His novel integrates lyrical, poetic, documentary, and narrative elements that ultimately portray women as having social responsibility. Steinbeck, who worked as a journalist,<sup>79</sup> draws from populist and modernist documentary practices to reach a large audience in his novel about Dust Bowl migration wherein fictionalised women feed hungry migrants and/or speak about people’s wills to change their own circumstances. The study moves through this spectrum and, therefore, engages with the aforementioned texts and other literature from the period, considering elements of modernism in other forms and proletarian writings as well as the use of the term ‘modernism’ to describe texts of leftist content and fragmented form.

This thesis, then, aims to investigate the representations of women in the four chosen proletarian experimental novels from 1930s America. The project is not an attempt to employ a 1930s historical and cultural mould that might confine or even stretch the representations of women in each chosen text. Rather, it is the close reading of the chosen novels which draws me into the relevant critical material. Through such close reading and use of critical material, the thesis aims to show that male-authored 1930s novels containing modernist and leftist

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<sup>77</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America*; Conroy; Robert Thompson, ‘An Interview with Jack Conroy’, *The Missouri Review* 7.1 (1983), 149-173 (p. 159).

<sup>78</sup> Dos Passos, ‘The Writer as Technician’, in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. by Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988), 169-172 (p. 169). See Jun Young Lee, *History and Utopian Disillusion: The Dialectical Politics in the Novels of John Dos Passos* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

<sup>79</sup> See Charles Wallenberg, ‘Introduction’, in *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to The Grapes of Wrath* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1988), pp. v-vii; Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 92-153 (p. 125).

elements did not necessarily marginalise female characters into stereotypical, one-dimensional, and agency-free roles.

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Previous feminist studies about proletarian literature from 1930s America, such as Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations*, account for the agency of the represented proletariat women in female rather than male-authored proletarian novels. *Radical Representations* gives an overview of the ambivalent status of women in the decade's Communist Party and different presentations and depictions of women in leftist magazines like *New Masses*.<sup>80</sup> Foley argues that proletarian fiction written at that time problematises the representation of the 'woman question' (women's struggles from sexual exploitation and from the 'double burden' experienced at home and work).<sup>81</sup> She suggests that male intellectuals often depict female characters from a 'traditionally sexist' angle; their women are 'threats' to revolutionary men's liberty, or their class-consciousness is confined to societally assigned capacities.<sup>82</sup> And that female proletarian writers, according to Foley, 'raised a series of considerations about consciousness and selfhood that invited their readers to move beyond familiar bourgeois ideological paradigms'.<sup>83</sup> In *Daughters of the Great Depression* which reads a wide range of 1930s novels, Laura Hapke also contrasts men's with women's proletarian novels. She observes that women in the decade's novels are rarely portrayed in breadwinning roles and she suggests that white male novelists in particular do not cast women out of the 'angel/whore dichotomy'.<sup>84</sup> Hapke writes:

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<sup>80</sup> Foley mentions that women's issues are shown broadly in the women's leftist Third Period magazine, *Working Women*, despite the fact that the magazine 'was openly revolutionary in outlook' (231). Meanwhile, the 'tone' of a Popular Front's magazine, *Woman Today*, 'was preponderantly proletarian and militant' without highlighting women's issues or concerns (231). Taking this into account, it is anticipated that women's representation in men's proletarian novels written in these two times, the Third Period and the Popular Front, differ and becomes more ambivalent. See *Radical Representation*, 213-246 (p. 231).

<sup>81</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, p. 245; 224; 227.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 213-246 (p. 231).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>84</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 29-67 (p. 47).

Female and black writers depicted the flawed mother victimized by family and economic burdens, whereas male writers either constructed a wife, daughter, or similarly ministering female with saintly qualities or deplored their lack.<sup>85</sup>

To Hapke, female novelists defy this dichotomy by revising mothers' 'mythic dimension' and associating daughters with 'political action'.<sup>86</sup> Neither Hapke nor Foley, though, tease out the inter and main narratives in male authored novels, like the ones I examine in this thesis, wherein significant agency is *also* given to women gradually, literally, or symbolically.

In the leftist feminist anthology *Writing Red*, Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz collect 1930s stories, essays, and poems by radical women.<sup>87</sup> Rabinowitz, similarly to Foley, argues that a number of these intellectuals, although shaped by the decade's leftism, correlate working-class issues and women's struggles.<sup>88</sup> Male intellectuals by contrast, according to Rabinowitz, mostly marginalise the 'woman question' due to them prioritising answering what was perceived to be the proletariat's main concern with the oppression of the working class, typically gendered male.<sup>89</sup> In *Labor and Desire*, Rabinowitz also argues that radical female novelists from the middle class address working-class issues but foreground women's desire, sexuality, maternity, and subjectivity in the narrative. In this sense, according to Rabinowitz, these novelists violate Mike Gold's call that proletarian fiction should portray men's rebelliousness against poverty and lack of employment. Rabinowitz suggests that radical women's evasion of this call means their creation of a subgenre of proletarian fiction: they write 'revolutionary' novels in which 'female sexuality and maternity' and 'class conflict' occur in the same narrative.<sup>90</sup> This subgenre, Rabinowitz argues, 'classes' gender issues and, at the same time, 'genders' class conflicts, thereby disrupting the masculinist

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 3-25 (p. 25).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 71-105 (p. 72).

<sup>87</sup> Nekola and Rabinowitz, eds., *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987).

<sup>88</sup> See Rabinowitz, 'Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism', in *Writing Red*, pp. 1-16.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-16.

<sup>90</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 173-182 (p. 181).

agenda that proletarian fiction often celebrates.<sup>91</sup> The four novels examined in this thesis at times involve gender and class issues, and thus overlap with some of the female-authored proletarian texts that Rabinowitz regards as revolutionary. This overlapping illustrates Hughes', Conroy's, Dos Passos', and Steinbeck's tendency towards featuring women's class awareness and agency in spite of writing their novels within the leftist context which called for men's actions for the proletariat.

More recent literary historical studies discuss the sentimentalism, sense of mobility, or dialogism (presenting multiple voices) in the decade's proletarian novels. Jennifer A. Williamson, in *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism* (2013), examines *The Grapes of Wrath*, Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, and Josephine Johnson's *Now in November* under a sub-genre she terms 'sentimental proletarian fiction'.<sup>92</sup> 'The sentimental mode', Williamson argues, allows novelists like Steinbeck, Lumpkin, and Johnson 'to refigure members of the working class as legitimate recipients of middle-class sympathy and as members of the American national family'.<sup>93</sup> To Williamson, these novelists encourage sympathy for the portrayed proletarians, which 'would lead to a radical political awakening'.<sup>94</sup> Dos Passos and Steinbeck, who write from an empathetic middle-class standpoint, and even Conroy and Hughes, who write from a working-class perspective, utilise the sentimental mode at certain points in their novels to awaken the reader's actions for the proletariat, a role which their fictionalised women gradually ascend in support of the proletariat.

I use the term 'sentimental' across the thesis and it needs some clarification, for the term is gendered and carries various connotations.<sup>95</sup> Suzanne Clark in *Sentimental*

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 63-96 (pp. 72-3).

<sup>92</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 1-22 (p. 11).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> In the late nineteenth century emerged the idea that women's writings are attuned to sentimental ideas, love stories and domestic concerns, whereas men's compositions are about other concerns, and this description was to dismiss women's writings at that time. See Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 1-16 (p. 2).

*Modernism*, which examines texts by political female writers from early twentieth century, points out that the term ‘sentimental’, rooted in the late nineteenth century, is often used to describe women’s writings as ‘uncritical’.<sup>96</sup> Clark argues that female writers with political leanings, like Emma Goldman, combine features which are considered sentimental – like women’s love, desire, domesticity, or maternal affection – with ‘politics of social reform’, and in so doing associate themselves with avant-garde modernism, which is known by its ‘elevation of intellect over sensibility’.<sup>97</sup> Williamson advances a similar argument concerning proletarian intellectuals’ revisionist use of sentimentalism, arguing that the term ‘sentimental’ was used in 1930s proletarian literature to describe social reform combined with domestic, maternal and familial concerns.<sup>98</sup> Stott and Rabinowitz use the term in their respective studies *Documentary Expression* and *They Must Be Represented* to question the factuality of the decade’s proletarian photography and documentary projects. To both critics, these projects’ middle-class observers, intellectuals, and photographers who aimed to attract sympathy towards the represented proletarian people, present these people as dignified yet vulnerable, thus sentimentalising them.<sup>99</sup> Across the thesis, I associate the term ‘sentimentalise’ and the words derived from it with: women’s feelings of love, mothers’ self-sacrifice, and working women’s victimisation as well as fortitude, and with women’s cooperation with other characters in need, a feature which reaches a peak in the prose stories of the novels under examination.

Janet Casey, in the introduction to her edited collection, *The Novel and the American Left* (2004), points out that 1930s ‘centrist social novelists’, like John Dos Passos, use

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 19-41 (p. 29).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 23; p. 69.

<sup>98</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 1-22 (p. 8).

<sup>99</sup> See Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, pp. 1-15; Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 46-64.



modernistic devices that create a ‘sense of dynamism through dialogic structures’.<sup>100</sup> Casey’s central argument is that leftist novels by women, which she classifies as ‘historically marginalized’ proletarian writing, also use these devices for personal and social commentary.<sup>101</sup> Casey explains,

[C]ertain left-leaning women novelists, concerned with the vicissitudes of gender as well as class, used a variety of figurative means to critique the female’s gendered stasis and to interpolate her, too, into the arguments for progress, revolution, change.<sup>102</sup>

Joseph Entin’s study *Sensational Modernism* (2007), examining novels like Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and other writings from the 1930s, similarly contends: ‘Sensational Modernism is one of these experimental forms, in which artists blend the energies and impulse of mass culture, the aesthetic techniques of high modernism, and a commitment to contesting hegemonic assumptions about the poor’.<sup>103</sup> Entin’s and Casey’s accounts here feed into the present thesis’ argument that proletarian experimental novels by male writers also do try to challenge stereotyped or gendered assumptions about women and to widen the scope of their proletarian activity. The four texts discussed use modernist techniques to interpolate multiple appearances of women and to involve women’s actions in working-class agenda.

Jessica Berman, in *Modernist Commitments* (2011), also follows the argument that working-class literature of the 1930s features some modernistic narrative techniques while being committed to proletarian themes. Berman refers to Conroy’s *The Disinherited* and reads it alongside Meridel Le Sueur’s *The Girl*, arguing that the two novels’ inclusion of multiple voices from the working class intensifies their political concerns.<sup>104</sup> She also

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<sup>100</sup> Casey, ed., ‘(Left) Contexts and Considerations’, in *The Novel and the American Left*, ix-xviii (p. xi).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>103</sup> Joseph B. Entin, *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-34 (p. 11).

<sup>104</sup> See Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 1-37 (p. 36).

suggests that the multi-voicedness in Conroy's novel functions similarly to that of contemporary African American modernist and proletarian texts by novelists like Zora Neale Hurston. Both Conroy and Hurston use dialogic structures to seek 'justice' for working-class people.<sup>105</sup> This thesis refers to proletarian novels by female writers including Hurston, Le Sueur, Johnson, and Lumpkin, and to other working-class texts from the decade whenever intersection is possible and illuminating.

To be sure, Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck are not the only proletarian novelists to use experimental form and leftist content to show how women's representations vary from stereotyped to politicised, from sentimentalised to seemingly historically modelled or culturally symbolised. The study chooses these four novels, however, as representative left-wing modernist novels that feature male protagonists but in which females are given agency in ways that complicate stereotypes or one-dimensional views about women. These four novelists do not stick to cultural, political, or even social guidelines or ideals upheld in or before the 1930s. Instead, they interacted with leftist politics and cultural programmes on an ad hoc basis without following rules or norms set out by the CPUSA or other arbiters on what the proletarian novel should address. Hughes, for instance, refused to adhere to the advice and demands of W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke and other leading figures in the 'New Negro' movement which outlined what an African American writer should represent.<sup>106</sup> In accord with other members, such as Hurston and Aaron Douglas, of a separate group who sometimes referred to themselves as the 'Niggeratti',<sup>107</sup> Hughes does not insist on the emphasis of African American dignity urged by Du Bois,<sup>108</sup> or the primitivism encouraged by

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 237-80 (p. 263).

<sup>106</sup> The demand of portraying African Americans who are 'New' and not slave-minded is explicitly stated in Robert A. Bone's *The Negro Novel in America*, and, indeed, in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*.

<sup>107</sup> See A. B. Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003), pp. 25-47.

<sup>108</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Criteria of Negro Art', in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. by David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 100-105 (p. 103).

his white patron Charlotte Mason.<sup>109</sup> Instead, through integrating blues songs with implicit political meanings into a story about African American proletarian struggles, his novel functions as a masked proletarian text which Gold and another leftist writer, Walt Carmon, praised in *New Masses*.<sup>110</sup>

Conroy, who was friends with Hughes and who was aware of African American struggles which overlapped with those of the proletariat, explores in *The Disinherited* Abraham Lincoln's glorification as a man of social change. This fits broadly with the slightly later CPUSA aim of equating communism – or leftist politics more generally – with “twentieth-century Americanism”.<sup>111</sup> But Conroy shows it to be a myth that has little bearing on the betterment of white and African American proletarian lives, and thus he refutes this masculinist ideal. Dos Passos positively reviews *The Disinherited* in a letter to Conroy and calls the novel an ‘unfaked piece of narrative’.<sup>112</sup> Three years later, in 1936, after his break from the Communist Party, he portrays in *The Big Money* a disillusionment with the Communist Party and with its effectiveness in supporting working-class people. Finally, Steinbeck, who contributed to one of the decade's agrarian photo-text projects, attempts in *The Grapes of Wrath* to dismantle gendered strictures – such as the belief which was often shown in late 1930s projects that a farm wife should be subordinate to her male counterpart – by his depiction of Dust Bowl migration. For all four writers, the exploration of mainstream norms becomes an indirect means for disrupting the stereotyping of women and for representing their contributions to the proletariat.

This thesis focuses on discussing the representation of women for two reasons. Firstly, the chosen novels, like the proletarian literary genre in general, are usually read as

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<sup>109</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 324-26 (p. 325).

<sup>110</sup> See Gold, ‘Notes of the Month’, *New Masses* 3.5 (September, 1930), p. 3; George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 209-276 (p. 274).

<sup>111</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259-282 (p. 274). Also, see Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 448); xiii-xxiii (p. xxii).

<sup>112</sup> qtd., in Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 325-55 (p. 328).

radical, modernist, or both without considering their diverse portrayals of women. Secondly, these novels reflect an attempted deviation from conventional form and content, through which female representations collide with orthodoxies regarding women as sexually or domestically driven and apolitical. Linda Myrsiades, in the introduction to *Race-ing Representation*,<sup>113</sup> maintains that societally accepted norms and politically internalised beliefs can be bypassed through ‘Representation’. She writes,

Representation is, in the end, even more significant as a political than a literary instrument. How we represent ourselves and who represents us are what make it possible to be different. Only when the possibility becomes a reality can we productively reach into the interstices of race and gender as well as historicize race in a way that localizes the voice that speaks and places it more appropriately in the context of larger issues of linguistic and cultural colonialism. Only then can de-racing take place.<sup>114</sup>

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall maintains that ‘Representation [...] is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer* to either the “real” world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary world of fictional objects, people and events’.<sup>115</sup> Represented images carry meanings that can be interpreted differently based on their contexts and their similarity to the original images. In Hall’s words, ‘Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted’.<sup>116</sup> The writers whose novels are examined in this thesis offer multiple representations of women, thus displaying ‘signs’ that need to be

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<sup>113</sup> This study by Myrsiades includes articles discussing the depiction of sexual, linguistic, historical and cultural issues in various African American writings from different periods.

<sup>114</sup> Linda Myrsiades, ‘Introduction’, in *Race-ing Representation: Voice, History, and Sexuality*, eds. by Kostas Myrsiades and Linda Myrsiades (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 1-16 (p. 14).

<sup>115</sup> Stuart Hall, ed., ‘The Work of Representation’, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 15-64 (p. 17).

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

interpreted: they carry meaning relevant to women's proletarian agency under confused social circumstances.

This thesis chooses to interpret these representations based on each novel's most relevant cultural contexts, for the novels under examination contextualise specific social struggles. David Peeler differentiates 'proletarian' from 'social' fiction, and suggests that the latter writings 'cultivate an optimism' although the real conditions are harder than what is being represented.<sup>117</sup> According to Warren French, a 'social novel' is neither historical text nor politically proletarian novel. Rather, it is a novel that requires its readers to refer to history in order to fully comprehend the events covered in the novel and the reasons behind the novelist's choice of modifying some of them.<sup>118</sup> According to Peeler's and French's understandings, the present study's first two novels can be classified as proletarian and the last two as social. However, the study's central point is that while differing in thematic, structural, and political sophistication, *Not Without Laughter*, *The Disinherited*, *The Big Money*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* represent women and their agency from different angles within working-class contexts and in more nuanced ways than previous commentators on male-authored 1930s texts of this kind have acknowledged.

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In the first chapter, to explore Hughes' representation of African American proletariat women, I make use of scholarship on stereotypes of African American women, blues singing and other African American popular modes of expression, and signifying as well as masking in African American rhetoric. I also refer to Harlem Renaissance literary texts and lyrical as well journalistic writings by Hughes from the 1930s and before. The chapter starts with an

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<sup>117</sup> Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet*, 1-12 (p. 3).

<sup>118</sup> French puts it this way: 'By "social novel," I mean a work that is so related to some specific historical phenomenon that a detailed knowledge of the historical situations is essential to a full understanding of the novel at the same time that the artist's manipulation of his materials provides an understanding of why the historical events involved occurred'. Warren French, *The Social Novel at the End of an Era* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), 1-17 (p. 7).

investigation of the representation of women in the novel's blues lyrics, and then it moves to the narrative women. It contends that the novel's songs portray stereotyped African American women (like primitives or matriarchs), yet these presentations figuratively indicate a resistance to societal confines. The novel's prose offers an array of African American proletariat women who, contrasted with these and certain indicated stereotypes, mask their responsibility towards the African American proletariat by their various means of living – domestic service, class transgressing, or singing the blues – especially once encouraging a relative's education to become an intellectual. Ultimately, protagonist Sandy Rogers acquires from his female relatives masked social awareness towards the proletariat from his people.

Radicalism, exemplified by joining strikes and fighting, is explicit in Conroy's *The Disinherited*, the subject of Chapter Two. This chapter overlaps with Hughes' novel at certain points, and it refers to details relevant to Conroy's novel specifically. These details include: cultural historians' ideas about popular culture in 1930s America; stereotypes about Irish American women; 1930s proletarian experimental writings; interpretations of the Lincolnian myth during the 1930s; and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of 'dialogism', 'skaz', and 'polyphony', which describe the blending of genres and the use of first-person narrative wherein other voices are integrated. The chapter first investigates the represented women in the novel's popular songs, representations that are one-dimensional and stereotypical, portraying women as passive lovers, destructive wives, and breeding mothers. Then it scrutinizes how the novel's first-person episodic narrative portrays women who collide with the narrator, Larry Donovan's, and other male characters' masculinist expectations. Further, the female protagonists, whose appearances and speech are revealed through Larry's narration, differ from stereotyped images of women, for it is their political awareness which influences Larry's final decision to fight with and for the proletariat.

The third chapter analyses how women are represented with further complexity in *The Big Money*. Having four sections (called Newsreels, Camera Eyes, biographies, and narrative sections), this 1936 novel is a more overtly modernist text than Hughes' or Conroy's and exhibits less masculinised leftist adherence. Dos Passos, having lost his confidence in the effectiveness of the Communist Party, represents women's agency and social collective inclinations. Nevertheless, his portrayal of women is not the same across the novel's four interwoven sections. Dos Passos tries to give space for women in the peripheral sections and to present more liberated and socially engaged females in the central narratives. Scholarship on the novelist's use of the various modes in the *U.S.A* trilogy, the influences of his break from the Communist Party on the themes raised in *The Big Money*, and studies about working women's ambivalent position in the early twentieth century and about 1930s documentary culture help illuminate the mobilised representations in this novel. The chapter first examines women's representations in the intercalary segments and then those of the female protagonists in the central narrative.

The final chapter discusses the depiction of Dust Bowl migrant women in *The Grapes of Wrath*, another collective novel. In this novel, Steinbeck, documenting the Dust Bowl migration from Oklahoma to California, uses modernist devices – such as the integration of forms of reportage into fictional narratives – in order to present the complex conditions that migrants encountered. Additionally, through the extended use of symbolism, different portrayals of women emerge. The novel's journalistic segments, which are investigated first in the chapter, contextualise the Dust Bowl migration, to which men and women react similarly, and further the segments show an initiative for women's activity indicated symbolically. The chapter then considers the novel's fictional narrative, and argues that it empowers women, and, further, presents them as a solution to Dust Bowl consequences. The chapter argues that Steinbeck, attempting to counter gendered agrarian norms, represents

symbolic, dynamic, and developing female figures who progressively reach a stage of action that renders them capable of socially supporting others, both family members and strangers. To elucidate this point, I refer to the articles Steinbeck wrote about the Dust Bowl shortly before composing this novel as well as other radical and Popular Front publications about the same topic. I also utilise ideas raised in this introduction, like those about women's positions as farm workers in the 1930s, the decade's agrarian documentary projects, and cultural modes of expression as means of escapism.

The four novels, all of which display elements of experimental modernism and address working-class challenges, problematise certain norms from the early twentieth century in order to portray disparate versions of women and their consciousness towards the working class. 'One characteristic of working-class studies', writes Janet Zandy,<sup>119</sup> 'is an attentiveness to those seemingly mundane tasks and things that are either invisible or generally ignored'.<sup>120</sup> In Zandy's terms, this thesis seeks to pay attention to points that are 'generally ignored' by critics about male-authored proletarian novels in general. More specifically, this thesis draws out the represented women's attempts at shaping other people's collective proletarian consciousness or pulling themselves, relatives, friends, proletarian people, or ones in need from social crises – efforts that even restricting gendered expectations or tensions have not hampered. Attention to these details will lead to a nuanced reading of 1930s proletarian experimental novels by male writers. More broadly, the consideration of these novels by Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck provides much-needed analysis of the stereotyping, sentimentality, dynamism combined with literal or emblematic politicism, and agency of represented women in the decade's experimental proletarian novels. The use of interpolated, layered, or multiple voices gives these novels a kind of ambiguity,

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<sup>119</sup> See Coles and Zandy, eds., *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology*.

<sup>120</sup> Zandy, '“Women Have Always Sewed”: The Production of Clothing and the Work of Women', in *What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies*, ed. by Zandy (New York: The Feminist Press, 1995), 148-153 (p.148).



allowing them to use their narratives to react against the conventions of the period as set out in songs or other forms of expression. This modernist technique, which involves the juxtaposition of conventional and non-conventional ideas and forms, as well as the histories engaged and the societal norms explored in these novels, facilitate various and layered representations of women, their agency, and their class awareness.

## CHAPTER I

### **Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*: African American Women and Masks of Their Social Consciousness**

In *Not Without Laughter*, his 1930 third-person narrative interwoven with blues lyrics, Langston Hughes presents a range of possible routes to intellectual improvement for protagonist Sandy Rogers through his relative women who hide their political rejection of race and class issues. Sandy's grandmother encourages him to become a public intellectual like Booker T. Washington and later one of his aunts wants him to, instead, emulate W.E.B. Du Bois in order to more radically resist social injustices. Eventually, Sandy decides to emulate both writers, and his blues-singer aunt funds his education. Hughes' novel is not in any straightforward sense the sort of propaganda which was called for by the African American public intellectual, activist, and editor Du Bois or by the Communist writer and editor Mike Gold.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the novel, which is initially set in Stanton, Kansas, and ultimately in Chicago, traces the development of Sandy's African American proletarian awareness under his female relatives' influence. In the novel's songs, Hughes invokes stereotypes of African American women which encode women's rejection of sexual, proletarian, and racial subordination. The narrative story, juxtaposed and connected to these and other styles of expression, represents women who motivate Sandy to pursue his education, as his singer aunt says, 'to be—able to help the black race' (217).

In the novel Hughes tries to dismantle stereotypes about African American women. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the time frame associated with the novel,<sup>2</sup> African American women were all too often viewed in culture based on stereotypes from earlier

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<sup>1</sup> See Du Bois, 'Criteria of Negro Art', 100-105 (p. 103); Gold, 'Go Left, Young Writers!', pp. 382-3; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: A Signet Classic, 1969), 12-32; 84-101 (pp. 86-7; 94).

<sup>2</sup> *Not Without Laughter* traces an intellectual's development during the 1910s, was worked on in the late years of the 1920s and appeared in 1930.

decades. The domestic maids who helped support their families, for instance, were portrayed as ‘mammies’, who were meek towards the whites, or as ‘matriarchs’, the domineering mothers who devote themselves to the breeding of children.<sup>3</sup> Michele Faith Wallace, in the study *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, further, points out that ‘Black people emerged from slavery with two distinct female archetypes’: ‘the Black Lady’ and ‘the Amazon’.<sup>4</sup> The former stereotype stands for ‘The privileged woman who had either been free before the [civil] war or maintained a special position in the white household’, and the latter refers to the female who was ‘stronger, tougher, more rebellious, and usually poor’.<sup>5</sup> Even notable blues singers, like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey who ‘addressed urgent social issues and helped to shape collective modes of black consciousness’, were often seen as ‘primitives’, savage and sensual, directed by sexual drives.<sup>6</sup> Lena Hill, tracing African American visual and verbal arts that several intellectuals rely on when challenging derogatory stereotypes, argues that the Harlem Renaissance’s artists typically represented the female as being either a ‘sexually unfettered primitive’ or a ‘pristine Madonna’.<sup>7</sup> In *Not Without Laughter*, the laundress Aunt Hager, cook Annjee, class transgressor Tempy, and carnival-dancer-turned-blues-singer Harriett, despite appearing respectively like a ‘mammie’, a ‘matriarch’, an ‘amazon’, and a ‘primitive’<sup>8</sup> do not simply conform to these societal images.

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<sup>3</sup> Ekaterini Georgoudaki, ‘Audre Lorde: Revising Stereotypes of Afro-American Womanhood’, *Arbeiten Aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 16.1 (1991), 47-66 (p. 48). Of the several archetypes generated about African American women in early and modern American fiction by the whites are the sacrificing figures victimised by ‘environmental determinism’ and the ‘alter-ego’ individuals working for their race’s ‘brotherhood’. These images originate from racist expectations. Michele Wallace insists that ‘slavery’ is the reason behind the creation of ‘the myth of the superwoman’. See Michele Faith Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: John Cadler, 1979), p. 130; p. 154. Also, see Catherine Juanita Starke, *Black Portraiture in American Fiction: Stock Characters, Archetypes, and Individuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho*, p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xi-xx (p. xiv).

<sup>7</sup> Lena Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of an African American Literary Tradition* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014), 81-118 (p. 101). Intellectuals like Nella Larsen, nevertheless as Hill argues, depict female protagonists away from this stereotyping, the idealism and the simplicity of those stereotypes (p. 102).

<sup>8</sup> These stereotypes were prevailing in the American culture in slavery times and continued to appear in later decades in America. See Georgoudaki, ‘Audre Lorde: Revising Stereotypes of Afro-American Womanhood’, 47-66.

Rather, with the exception of Sandy's mother, Annjee, they use their work or life experiences as masks to hide their awareness of race and class issues, and this masking is revealed by their investment in Sandy's education. This chapter argues that in this novel, Hughes both encodes and challenges stereotypes about proletariat African American women by representing females who are neither simplified nor explicitly politicised.

*Not Without Laughter*, to use terms from Houston Baker's respective descriptions of Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) and Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), blends 'the mastery of the [masking] form' through Hughes' portrayal of concealed revolutionary views and 'deformation of the form' in his use of African American songs.<sup>9</sup> In a 1926 essay which appeared in the *Nation*, Hughes writes: 'I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet," as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world'.<sup>10</sup> Here, Hughes denounces African American artists who choose not to portray their people's social position. Hughes was involved in the Harlem Renaissance, the African American cultural, literary, and political movement that started in the early 1920s and overlapped with the Communist Party Third Period. The proletarian novelist Arna Bontemps classifies the Harlem Renaissance into two phases: the phase wherein propaganda was intensified (1921-1924) and the period in which African American writers deviated from focusing on representing their people's dignity and instead associated themselves with writers and patrons from the white intelligentsia (1924-1931).<sup>11</sup> Hughes, who received patronage from the wealthy white woman Charlotte Mason, chose not to follow Du Bois' suggestion in

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<sup>9</sup> See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 15; 58; 68.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics and World Affairs*, ed. by Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), vol. 9, 31-6 (p. 36).

<sup>11</sup> See Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford UP 1976), 3-15 (p. 9); *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, ed. by Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), xix-xxxix (p. xxv). A second Harlem Renaissance took place in the late 1930s wherein African American writers and artists were funded by Federal Arts Project. See Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, 'Second Harlem Renaissance', in *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Cary D. Winiz and Paul Winkelman (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1099 -1100.

‘Criteria of Negro Art’ (1926) to depict African Americans as perfect through the use of ‘truth’, ‘beauty’, and ‘propaganda’.<sup>12</sup> Rather, *Not Without Laughter* discloses struggles like poverty, the lack of decent employment, and the lynching of African American boys in the South, and suggests indirect means (for example, education and blues singing in Chicago) of overcoming them. Unlike what Alain Locke calls the ‘New Negro’ writers, such as Du Bois,<sup>13</sup> Hughes conceals issues of race and class struggle in his novel. Structurally, however, the novel displays the lyrical-narrative integration that African American Harlem Renaissance writers including Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and Du Bois himself made use of.<sup>14</sup> *Not Without Laughter* amalgamates implicitly political lyrics, the blues,<sup>15</sup> and a progressive narrative – the story of Sandy’s development – to implicitly address African American proletarian struggles and engage women with these concerns indirectly.

To explain the political layers in Hughes’ novel and women’s relevance to them, this chapter uses Baker’s key argument about the thematic and structural complexity of African American narrative-poetic writings, and the concept of the ‘pious mask’ which Baker uses to describe the non-confrontational rhetorical strategy that Washington follows in writing *Up from Slavery*.<sup>16</sup> It also uses political anthropologist James C. Scott’s and social historian Robin D. G. Kelley’s work on ‘infrapolitics’, as well as Henry Louis Gates’ account of signification in African American narratives,<sup>17</sup> to illuminate the forms of masking Hughes explores in his novel. The chapter’s first section analyses the layered stereotyped depictions

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<sup>12</sup> Du Bois, ‘Criteria of Negro Art’, 100-105 (p. 103).

<sup>13</sup> Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> By utilising the vernacular as well as popular mediums of expression, these novelists intensify their African American people’s struggles.

<sup>15</sup> See Anthony Dawahare, *African American Studies: Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: A New Pandora’s Box* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 92-110 (p. 105).

<sup>16</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 25-36 (p. 25; p. 32).

<sup>17</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), p. 19; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: A Division of Macmillan, 1994), pp. 7-8; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 44-88 (p. 82).

of ‘primitives’, ‘matriarchs’, and the figures in the integrated songs. The second section discusses Hager’s representation as a washerwoman and Washington’s admirer who, although functioning like a ‘mammy’, masks her rejection of racial and classed injustices as she encourages Sandy’s education. The third section suggests that Annjee, who promotes neither her son’s reliance on her nor his education, differs from ‘matriarchs’. The fourth section maintains that Tempy, a class transgressor, surpasses Annjee’s and Hager’s models. Admiring Du Bois, the New Negro intellectual and activist, she – not an ‘Amazon’ (a poor woman who is explicitly rebellious against the whites) –<sup>18</sup> elevates Sandy’s social awareness. As examined in the last section, Harriett, by dancing to popular forms of expression and singing the blues, masters the encoding of rebelliousness against social limitations. Harriett, who is not simply a ‘primitive’, further actualises Hager’s hope in advancing Sandy’s education. Sandy, as a direct result of all of these women’s influences, ultimately develops, like Hughes, a Washingtonian sense of masking but also some of Du Bois’ politics that are more confrontational. *Not Without Laughter*’s plot is a kind of ‘*kunstlerroman*’, a *bildungsroman* subgenre that traces an artist’s maturity and intellectual development.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, its narrative ends with Harriett and her support of Sandy’s education, and this chapter closes similarly and goes on to suggest that Sandy is expected to write a blues-prose novel about social issues just as Hughes did with *Not Without Laughter*.

Literary critics (such as Seth Moglen and James Smethurst), commenting on the modernist, revolutionary-themed poems Hughes wrote during the 1930s, maintain that Hughes’ use of modernist devices, like structural fragmentation, helps intensify the

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<sup>18</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho*, p.154.

<sup>19</sup> See Sharon L. Jones, *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Faust, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 15.

audience's understanding of race and class issues.<sup>20</sup> Hughes' contemporary Sterling Brown and more recent critics such as R. Baxter Miller, and Elizabeth Schultz contradictorily note simplicity, complexity, or both in *Not Without Laughter's* themes and structure. Brown argues that the novel integrates realism and lyricism in its presentation of racial issues. '[D]one with poetic realism', Brown continues, the novel's narrative 'is a good novel of boyhood'.<sup>21</sup> In a more recent study, Schultz argues that in the novel's prose and blues lyrics Hughes refers to elements from nature (like the sun, stars, and darkness) to rhetorically demonstrate a hope in advancement in spite of racist conditions that African Americans experience.<sup>22</sup> 'Family and home', according to Miller, 'unify the novel, with Hughes's combining fiction and history in his depiction of social setting and character'.<sup>23</sup> Through the blending of genres and the reflection of social settings, the novel indirectly intensifies political messages and engages women in the process.

Jonathan Scott, in a recent study examining Hughes' advocacy of socialism during the Cold War, discusses the modernist techniques, principally collage and cubism, that the novelist utilises in his writings from the 1940s-1950s.<sup>24</sup> Rona Cran, in investigating collage in artistic works from the twentieth century, emphasises that 'Collage is about encounters. It is about bringing ideas into conversation with one another'.<sup>25</sup> The bringing together of various ideas to explain a submerged meaning suggests a level of thematic complexity, which is masked, "signifying" in Gates' term, and evident in Hughes' novel. About the novel's

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<sup>20</sup> Seth Moglen, 'Modernism in the Black Diaspora: Langston Hughes and the Broken Cubes of Picasso', 1189-1205 (p. 1190); James Smethurst, *New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 93-115.

<sup>21</sup> Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama and the Negro in American Fiction* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 115-168 (p. 155).

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Schultz, 'Natural and Unnatural Circumstances in Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*', *Callaloo*, 25.4 (2003), 1177-1187 (p. 1185).

<sup>23</sup> R. Baxter Miller, 'Langston Hughes, 1902-1967: A Brief Biography', in *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, ed. by Tracy (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 32-63 (p. 35).

<sup>24</sup> See Jonathan Scott, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), pp. 156-218.

<sup>25</sup> Rona Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature and Culture: Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O'Hara, and Bob Dylan* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 1-40 (p. 4).

structure, Scott writes, ‘*Not Without Laughter* [...] has no underlying plot and draws on the epistolary tale, the blues poem, the memoir, and the bildungsroman for its complex structure’.<sup>26</sup> The novel, certainly, follows a chronological progression that traces Sandy’s gradual development into an intellectual. It also includes aspects of memoir writing drawn from the details of Hughes’ own life – including the complex relationship Hughes had with his own mother and his intellectual individuation under racial and classed circumstances – which are later acknowledged in his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea*.<sup>27</sup> Hughes’ use of bildungsroman and semi-autobiographical elements in addition to the blues songs deepens his novel’s fragmented form and its indirectly political content.

Ultimately, the novel avoids a radical conversion of its male protagonist, and rather puts an emphasis on female masked political influence. Joyce A. Joyce investigates some of Hughes’ verse and prose works including *Not Without Laughter* by relating them to more recent African American feminist works like Alice Walker’s 1982 epistolary novel, *The Colour Purple*, and maintains that Hughes shifts the focus from masculine politics in order to emphasise women’s centrality and necessity to society.<sup>28</sup> A key point in Joyce’s analysis, and one which I sustain in this chapter, is the argument that Hughes has not simply represented women stereotypically.<sup>29</sup> With this in mind, it is evident that *Not Without Laughter* presents complex representations of African American proletariat women, in spite of its deliberate allusion to stereotypes. The discussion starts by teasing out these stereotypes in the novel’s blues songs.

### **Stereotypes with Two Dimensions in the Novel’s Blues Lyrics**

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<sup>26</sup> Scott, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes*, 106-155 (p. 107).

<sup>27</sup> See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol.1, 1902-1941: *I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 3-22 (p. 4).

<sup>28</sup> Joyce A. Joyce, ‘Hughes and Twentieth-Century Genderracial Issues’, in *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, 119-140 (p. 120). Also, see pages 120-1; 138.

<sup>29</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 125.



The writing and singing of blues lyrics during the 1920s and 1930s was a means for African Americans to indicate their feelings towards personal and political struggles.<sup>30</sup> Bessie Smith's blues songs about common desires, fears, and hopes, for instance, had two main characteristics: they expressed 'her own feelings and experiences as a Black woman', and they also were 'very familiar' to African Americans because they expressed 'human emotions that were universal'.<sup>31</sup> In order to address proletarian African American issues and to portray women with encoded political intentions, Hughes composes blues lyrics in *Not Without Laughter*, and the form itself is significant for its lack of revolutionary ideas. Blues lyrics, as Anthony Dawahare writes, 'did not express (at least explicitly) militant politics against oppression'.<sup>32</sup> Rather, they 'have a depth and a breadth that reflect a range of emotion, experience, and imagination'.<sup>33</sup> Hughes' choice to integrate his novel's central narrative, which portrays women who embody race and class awareness, with these lyrics hints at a masked layer of political and social meaning. The novel's songs carry a covert call to reject sex, class, and race limitations. The literal message from these lyrics classifies women as variously as 'primitives', 'matriarchs', or being equal to men. The figurative message, though, is that these women aim to implicitly change their own and other people's social positions. Deceitful women counter men's sexist expectations. Breeding mothers better a relative's future. And the 'I' persona which is neither male nor female can advance African Americans' positions through education. This section investigates these layered portrayals which are presented in the novel's songs.

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<sup>30</sup> See Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 190-297; Dawahare, *African American Studies*, 92-110.

<sup>31</sup> William Barlow, 'Bessie Smith', in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by Darlene Hine and others (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 1, 1074-8 (p. 1077).

<sup>32</sup> Dawahare, *African American Studies*, 92-110 (p. 105).

<sup>33</sup> Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 59-140 (p. 75).

It was a common technique for New Negro novelists to attach songs to prose writings. Hughes' contemporaries (such as Nella Larsen and Claude McKay) conjoin blues or jazz lyrics with fictional narratives in order to represent their culture's authenticity and its characters' reflection of paradoxical attitudes.<sup>34</sup> Hughes adheres to this style of writing, but he employs a unique blues form (for example, as discussed later in this section, dividing the repeated lines into two lines) to encode and figure revolutionary views. Personae in his novel's lyrics, regardless of their sex, raise similar topics: symbolised sexuality, and women's and men's disappointment with love.<sup>35</sup> These feelings reveal a latent protest against social injustice, for blues songs demonstrate literal meanings that encode figurative implications about African Americans. Baker, who investigates thematic doubleness in African American writings, suggests that '[o]ne way of describing the blues is to claim their amalgam as a code radically conditioning Afro-America's cultural signifying'.<sup>36</sup> This code is evident in *Not Without Laughter*'s lyrics which, unlike what Du Bois called for, rarely dignify African Americans. While presenting both men's and women's discontent in love, the novel's songs carry a rejection of societal limitations by both sexes. Steven Tracy, who writes about Hughes' blues lyrics, maintains:

The most essential element of the blues is the feeling that derives from a life style and a particular situation—something that happened to the singer or someone else, or that has been imagined as possible, or that has been imagined to reflect a deeper truth about the life of the singer, though the situation is not literally possible.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> For further details about these and later African American writers', like Zora Neale Hurston's, integration of songs or music into their prose writings and their representations of jazz and blues characters, see A. Yemisi Jimoh's *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction: Living in Paradox* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Tracy, nevertheless, argues that Hughes in other blues lyrics has 'classified the blues as masculine or feminine in theme' (*Langston Hughes and the Blues*, p. 117).

<sup>36</sup> Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1-14 (p. 5).

<sup>37</sup> Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, pp. 84-5.

Many of the lyrics in *Not Without Laughter* appear to be concerned with men's and women's emotional struggles, but a closer analysis reveals deeper truths, including a critique of societal norms.

In the novel, Sandy's father Jimboy and aunt Harriett sing a blues song which expresses men's and women's dissatisfaction with being in a monogamous relationship, and which figuratively challenges the confines of relationships more generally. The song's male persona, performed by Jimboy, suggests that deserting his woman can provide sexual liberation: 'O, yo' windin' an' yo' grindin'/Don't have no effect on me,/O, yo' windin' an' yo' grindin'/[...]/'Cause I can wind an' grin/like a monkey round a coconut-tree!' (34). The female persona, performed by Harriett, responds that she deserves heterosexual relationships outside marriage by repeating 'I see that you don't want me' (34). Repeating the first line twice in these stanzas suggests a meaning that exceeds the literal one. Gates, discussing African American rhetorical use of language, emphasises that 'black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use'.<sup>38</sup> This duality of meaning results from the way African Americans signify their words. 'Signifyin(g)', Gates writes, 'is a uniquely rhetorical concept, entirely textual or linguistic, by which a second statement or figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first'.<sup>39</sup> Repeating the same line in the same song suggests a reversal to the literal meaning about sexuality first implied by the song. 'Sexuality', according to Angela Davis, 'was central in both men's and women's blues'.<sup>40</sup> Gregory Woods argues that writers like Hughes and McKay refer to homosexuality in their poems to interchangeably address racial struggles.<sup>41</sup> In the song performed by Jimboy and Harriett, Hughes encodes men's and women's rejection of sexist

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<sup>38</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xix-xxviii (pp. xxii-iii).

<sup>39</sup> Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 3-58 (p. 49).

<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 3-22 (p. 11).

<sup>41</sup> '[I]t is often possible', Woods writes, 'to read a particular poem as referring (in images such as that of the social outcast) to either racial or sexual oppression, interchangeably'. Gregory Woods, 'Gay Re-Readings of the Harlem Renaissance Poets', *Journal of Homosexuality* 26. 2-3 (1993), 127-142 (p. 127).

expectations. Jimboy's repetition of 'O, yo' windin' an' yo' grindin'' and Harriett's line 'I see that you don't want me' have two meanings: the private one and the public one. The former expresses repressed sexuality and the latter urges the audience to ignore those repressed feelings and break free from societal confinements. This song, ultimately, says one thing yet signifies something else. Overtly, it demonstrates how men and women are upset with their relationships. On a deeper level, though, it encourages both men and women to deviate from the limitations of prescribed sexuality.

In this song, the female persona appears as 'primitive', driven for and by sexuality, yet the linguistic nature of the blues lyrics indicates that she does not conform to this sexual wildness. Tracy argues that another of Hughes' songs, called 'Only Woman Blues', which is sung by a man, 'becomes a kind of therapy, a way of working out difficulties and a way of *facing*, not evading, the problem at hand; the singer is not a pitiful whiner but, in the end, a proud and resolute man'.<sup>42</sup> Cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine also postulates,

Like the spirituals of the nineteenth century the blues was a cry for release, an ode to movement and mobility, a blend of despair and hope. Like both the spirituals and folktales blues was an expression of experiences and feelings common to the group.<sup>43</sup>

The female persona in Hughes' song from the novel neglects her lover and, thus, establishes a socially liberating space for herself and other women. Behind the primitive mask, this persona counteracts the stereotype of a woman driven by sexual desire.

Numerous other lyrical lines in the novel, such as those in the chapter called 'Dance', suggest men's lack of confidence in women:

- 'When de blues is got you,/Ain't no use to run away./[...]/'Cause de blues is like a woman/That can turn yo' good hair grey'. (67)
- 'But ma baby was deceitful./She must a thought that I was blind'. (67)

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<sup>42</sup> Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 141-265 (p. 192).

<sup>43</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 190-297 (p. 237).

- 'She quit me fo' a Texas gambler,/So I had to git another broad'. (67)
- 'You gonna wake up some mawnin'/An' turn yo' smilin' face./[...]/Look at yo' sweetie pillow—/An' find an' empty place!' (68)

While these lines present women as indifferent to their lovers' feelings, a masked hope for the betterment of African Americans – like the development which occurs in Sandy's life – is connected to women's presence or absence. *Not Without Laughter's* narrator proclaims that when Sandy goes with his father, Jimboy, to the carnival, a place where societal norms are often transgressed,<sup>44</sup> the boy feels the sadness of the blues while 'white people around him laughed' (77). This situation of paradoxical reactions affirms the duality of meaning in the novel's blues songs, which show one-dimensional women yet encode these women's influences on the people around them.

The first song in another narrative-lyrical chapter, 'Guitar', in which Harriett and Jimboy sing blues lines while Annjee and Sandy listen, portrays a mother expressing love for her son: 'Thro yo' arms around me, baby,/Like de circle round de sun!' (33). This relationship suggests a mother's acceptance of her boy's reliance on her. Blues critic Paul Oliver notices that in numerous African American blues lyrics, '[n]ot unexpectedly the Negro mother tended to be more admired—and more missed—by her offspring than the father'.<sup>45</sup> Davis points out, though, that the inclusion of 'the mother figure' is not a recurring feature in blues lyrics. Davis uses examples of lyrics by Smith and Rainey, women who liberated themselves from domestic domains and whose purpose was to free their audiences from 'the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of

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<sup>44</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 'Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works', in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 101-180 (122-3); Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 136-182 (p. 181).

<sup>45</sup> Oliver quotes a blues song stating: 'Mother was a woman sure to me, I really do know, (twice)/ I'll never have a friend like my dear old mother no more' (75). Paul Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues* (New York: Collier Books, 1960).

the era were constructed'.<sup>46</sup> Hughes, despite apparently modelling Harriett after these two singers, portrays the child in this song as a mother's beloved, and the mother as a 'matriarch'. This conventional mother-and-son relationship, nevertheless, also suggests the ironic influence of its absence on the son's development, intellectually and socially, as what happens in the main plot of the novel.

Education is the solution which *Not Without Laughter* suggests is the key to better the African American working class' position. This message is further promoted in some of the novels' songs which use the pronoun 'I' to refer to men or women, indicating that the *I*'s sex is less important than his/her message. One lyric which appears early in *Not Without Laughter* states: 'I got a mule to ride/[...]/Down in the South somewhere' (37). Seemingly about travelling in the South, the song paradoxically ends with riding the mule 'Down in some lonesome grave' (37). In a middle chapter, 'School,' in which Sandy is given a rear seat in his class because of his colour, the above 'mule' becomes a 'train' that the persona craves to ride, so s/he can achieve deferred dreams:

Kansas City Southern!  
I mean de W.&A.!  
I'm gonna ride de first train  
I catch goin' out ma way.  
I'm got de railroad blues—! (86)

These lines – in which the sex of *I* is not identified and in which the means of traveling is the *train* – reflect a hope for change. According to Hazel Carby, though, 'The train' symbolises 'freedom and mobility for men in male blues songs' but when the persona is female it signifies 'imminent desertion and future loneliness'.<sup>47</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, nevertheless,

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<sup>46</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 3-22 (p. 13).

<sup>47</sup> Hazel V. Carby, "'It Just Be's Dat Way Sometimes": The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues', in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. by Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 1990), 238-249 (p. 243).

points out that the idea of leaving the South itself, which recurs in male and female blues songs, figures African Americans seeking ‘freedom’ in the North due to them, men and women, struggling from ‘social injustice’ in the South.<sup>48</sup> For Hughes in the novel, this hope in gaining better life conditions emerges through the persona’s receiving an education in Chicago.

This I’s persona’s receiving of education, thus, might be the way to help African Americans as a group. Tracy maintains that Hughes’ use of first-person pronouns in most lyrics reflects a tendency towards employing ‘what could be called a “first-person communal” perspective’.<sup>49</sup> Undoubtedly, the last lyric of the novel, sung by ‘some old black worshippers’ in Chicago, maintains: ‘By an’ by when the mawnin’ comes,/Saints an’ sinners all are gathered home/[...]/ An’ we’ll understand it better by an’ by!’ (217-8). This last line unifies African Americans of different attitudes and promotes the dream of resisting inequality through pursuing an African American persona’s education.

On one level, the women presented in the novel’s lyrics are stereotyped as ‘primitives’ or ‘matriarchs’. On another, these women implicitly counter expectations about themselves and their people. The historian Ben Sidran remarks that ‘Blues, the secular “devil music”, was both a catharsis for the anxieties caused by irrational suppression and, finally, a healthy, if cynical, assertion of the black ego’.<sup>50</sup> Hughes’ choice to include blues lyrics, rather than traditional poems, in his novel suggests a deliberate meaning. The presence of the lyrics allow the author to reflect on social complexities and to suggest non-radical solutions without simply stereotyping African American proletariat women and their methods of challenging inequalities between the races, classes, and sometimes sexes. The narrative’s female

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<sup>48</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Tracy, *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, 85-118 (p. 110).

<sup>50</sup> Sidran, *Black Talk*, 30-52 (pp. 35-6).

characters shed a light on these portrayals, challenge stereotypes, and the novel's lyrical-narrative structure enables Hughes to represent women hiding political attitudes.

### **Aunt Hager, a Laundress Grandmother with Masked Political Tendencies**

In the novel's story, Hughes characterises a grandmother, Hager, who experiences physical burden in her work as laundress and who aspires for her grandson's, Sandy's, education, indicating the significance of her influence on Sandy's development. An image like this one Hughes portrayed five years earlier in the lyric 'A Song to a Negro Wash-Woman' (1925). In this poem which does not appear in the novel, Hughes writes:

Oh, wash-woman  
Arms elbow-deep in white suds,  
Soul washed clean,  
Clothes washed clean,—  
I have many songs to sing you  
Could I but find the words.  
[...]  
I know how you send your children to school, and high-school, and even college.  
I know how you work and help your family when times are hard.<sup>51</sup>

While prefiguring Hughes' characterisation of Hager, the poem reflects its author's struggle with what Henry Louis Gates terms 'the burden of representation':

The strictures of 'representation' have had wide and varied permutation in the black community. For as we know, the history of Afro-Americans is marked not only by its

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<sup>51</sup> Hughes, 'A Song to a Negro Wash-Woman', in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems, 1921-1940*, ed. by Arnold Rampersad (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 158-159.



noble demands for political tolerance from the larger society, but also by its paradoxical tendency to censure its own.<sup>52</sup>

Representation is an attempt to reflect and re-present situations and people from perceived scenes or filtered memories.<sup>53</sup> And, the idea of masking protests against African American social marginalisation certainly appear in writings by Washington, and in the later work of Ralph Ellison. Similarly, Hughes encodes ideas of protest in his representation of African American and proletarian issues, and his above-quoted lyric is an example. A more complex example occurs in *Not Without Laughter*. The novel includes Hughes' memories about African American wash-grandmothers, including his own,<sup>54</sup> but also dismantles the superficiality of the 'mammy' type. Hager, the fictionalised laundress and grandmother, intends to make an educated man out of Sandy: 'He's gwine be another Booker T. Washington' (97). This section discusses her representation as a washerwoman, who hides her anger about social injustices, and her indirect political influence on Sandy's development, addressing the significance of her desire for him to be another Washington, a writer who wanted to improve African American conditions without engaging in confrontational politics with white Americans.<sup>55</sup>

In *Seven Days a Week*, a historical study surveying women's domestic service from the Civil War until the first decades of the twentieth century, David Katzman points out that some African American women accepted their work as servants because it was the profession assigned to them.<sup>56</sup> In *Not Without Laughter*, Hager who works in one of what Katzman calls

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<sup>52</sup> Gates, 'The Black Man's Burden', in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. by Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 75-84 (p. 75).

<sup>53</sup> Hall, ed., 'The Work of Representation', 15-64 (p. 17).

<sup>54</sup> See George E. Kent, 'Hughes and the Afro-American Folk Cultural Tradition', in *Modern Critical Views: Langston Hughes*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 17-36 (p. 21).

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *Negro Poetry*, 17-48 (p. 48).

<sup>56</sup> David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), 44-94 (p. 44).

‘low-status occupation without any educational, experiential, or skill requisites for entry’,<sup>57</sup> appears satisfied with her work for long hours and low wages:

Hager had risen at sunrise. On Thursdays she did the Reinharts’ washing, on Fridays she ironed it, and on Saturdays she sent it home, clean and beautifully white, and received as pay the sum of seventy-five cents. (25)

Hager ‘is too old’, Annjee writes to Sandy, ‘to be straining at the pump drawing water to wash clothes with’ (142). On one hand, Hager’s commitment to this service aligns her with the myth established about ‘mammies’.<sup>58</sup> On another, it is for her family’s sake. Historian Carter Woodson elucidates in an essay published in the same year as *Not Without Laughter* that no woman sacrificed herself for others like the ‘Negro washerwoman’.<sup>59</sup> African American maids were treated as inferior to their mistresses, and they did household chores in two houses: their families’ and their mistresses’.<sup>60</sup> Katzman points to the limited freedom of these women, for their ‘workday ran from before dawn until after nightfall’,<sup>61</sup> and Hughes’ Hager is literally cast in this position.

Hager’s acceptance of this physically tiring labour, however, conceals a deeper, yet unexpressed, internal conflict. Bessie Smith in ‘Washerwoman’s Blues’ (1928) helps articulate the unseen burden of Hager’s service. Smith’s persona sings, ‘All day long I’m slavin/All day long I’m bustin suds/Gee my hands are tired washin out these dirty duds’.<sup>62</sup> By articulating tiredness but also anger, in the use of ‘slavin’ and in Smith’s delivery, the song encodes a resistance to this condition. Steven Tracy suggests that blues songs, as performative musical poems, ‘have a depth and a breadth that reflect a range of emotion,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>58</sup> See Clinton, ‘Mammy’, in *Black Women in America*, 744-46 (p. 744).

<sup>59</sup> Carter. G. Woodson, ‘The Negro Washerwoman, a Vanishing Figure’, *The Journal of Negro History*, 15.3 (1930), 269-277 (p. 270).

<sup>60</sup> See Rabinowitz, ‘Film Noir, Proletarian Literature, and Black Women’s Fiction’, 229-254 (pp. 232-3).

<sup>61</sup> Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 95-145 (pp. 110-111).

<sup>62</sup> qtd., in Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Book, 1985), 196-231 (pp. 221-2).

experience, and imagination'.<sup>63</sup> The discrepancy between what is said and intended characterises the genre of blues lyrics, and this relates to Gates' idea about signification, wherein 'surface' and 'latent' meanings are not the same.<sup>64</sup> The signifying speaker, Gates argues, says a thing that means something else.<sup>65</sup> The persona in Smith's song functions similarly, for she hides her intention of rejecting her tiring work. Hughes' novel, which features integrated lyrics with similarly doubled meanings, imbues Hager with similarly unspoken resistance. Hager silently accepts her work's toil and its low pay, but this acceptance encodes a deeper dissatisfaction that is left unexpressed.

Hager's act of coding her rejection of her life circumstances resembles a key scene in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, which shows how African American grandparents in the 1930s pretend satisfaction under racial oppression. Ellison met Hughes in New York in 1937 and was then introduced to Richard Wright, another intellectual with leftist and modernist leanings, and these meetings shaped *Invisible Man*'s content.<sup>66</sup> Ellison's first chapter explores an unnamed narrator's perplexity after realising that his grandfather's meekness as a slave was a form of pretence. The formulation of this protagonist's African American identity is stimulated by the grandfather's last words to the narrator's father:

"Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open". (*IM*, p. 16)

Meekness when serving the whites, the passage suggests, is a masked act. *Not Without Laughter*, also tracing the development of a grandson's proletarian awareness, embraces a similar message, and Hager hides some of this intention as she serves without complaint.

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<sup>63</sup> Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 59-140 (p. 75).

<sup>64</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44-88 (p. 82).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>66</sup> John F. Callahan, ed., 'Introduction', in *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 3-19 (p. 9).

In silently pursuing work for a white family, Hager may resemble a ‘mammy’, the stereotype which emerged during slavery and which became prominent in later decades which suggests that African American maids were completely dedicated and faithful to their white employers.<sup>67</sup> Early in the novel, Hughes writes,

All the neighborhood, white or colored, called his grandmother when something happened. She was a good nurse, they said, and sick folks liked her around. Aunt Hager always came when they called, too, bringing maybe a little soup that she had made or a jelly. Sometimes they paid her and sometimes they didn’t. (5-6)

The passage here describes Hager’s meekness, which is like that of a ‘mammy’. However, in her own moralistic speeches and targets for her family, Hager hides her rejection of social confines. When Sister Whiteside, her neighbour, whose children quit school, sees no harm in Harriett’s choice of singing instead of pursuing her education, Hager expresses frustration concerning the lack of educated African Americans:

“De Lawd knows it’s a hard job, keepin’ colored chillens in school, Sister Whiteside, a mighty hard job. De niggers don’t help ’em, an’ de white folks don’t care if they stay or not”. (14)

Hager’s view here collides with her later argument that during slavery and other times ‘the whites are good’ (50). It is through her desire to advance her family’s social position through education that Hughes complicates the ‘mammy’ stereotype.

Morality and patience are the means Hager uses to hide her dissatisfaction with social inequalities. Booker T. Washington, whom she wants Sandy to emulate, promoted these non-confrontational politics in his 1901 autobiography *Up from Slavery* as a method to help African Americans fight slavery without being hostile towards the whites.<sup>68</sup> With these suggestions, Washington speaks from behind ‘a pious mask’ to play a part in the

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<sup>67</sup> Clinton, ‘Mammy’, in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, 744-46 (p. 744).

<sup>68</sup> See Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in *Booker T. Washington: Up from Slavery*, ed. by William L. Andrews (New York: Norton & Company, 1996); Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 12-32 (pp. 16-17).

advancement of the African American social position during slavery and after,<sup>69</sup> and Hager, behind a similarly pious disguise, hides her protest against social injustices. Twice in the novel she whips her daughter Harriett for coming home late which is, in her view, an immoral trait (58; 71). Likewise, when Sandy has thrown Tempy's expensive present, the fat volume of *Anderson's Fairy Tales*, "un'neath de stove in de ashes", Hager whips the boy (100; 110). Hager tends to teach both the necessity of embracing morality and being educated, both of which are progressive masks, to overcome their family's hard position. Once, when Hager prevents Harriett from attending a dance with her friends in order to keep her daughter 'decent' and 'good', Harriett cries: "Lemme go! You old Christian fool!" (32). Hager's acceptance of Christian morals and her frequent attendance of the church suggest her concealment of progressive intentions. Lois Helmbold maintains that during the 1930s, many African American women who attended church joined strikes and revolutions to better their living or working conditions.<sup>70</sup> While Hager seems apolitical, the church she attends potentially makes her realise the necessity of helping African Americans while avoiding radical conduct. She, who is able to cope with the conditions of her life (when, for example, she continues to serve although she is an old woman; and when she suggests that Sandy wears Annjee's shoes instead of buying new ones) appears to act, like Washington, from behind a mask of endurance.

This indirect means of rejecting racial and proletarian inequalities triggers Sandy's social awareness. A sociological study contends that a number of African American grandmothers in the first decades of the twentieth century contributed to the shaping of their grandchildren's lives; they 'are the indomitable source of material and spiritual strength' in

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<sup>69</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 25-36 (p. 25; p. 32).

<sup>70</sup> Lois Rita Helmbold, 'The Depression', in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by Darlene Hine and others (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), vol.1, p. 330.

spite of encountering ‘a world of prejudice and adversity’.<sup>71</sup> Through his grandmother, Hughes himself ‘had early learned the heroic side of black life, and he had experienced the rituals of the black church and pretended to be saved’.<sup>72</sup> Hager has similar and even stronger impacts on Sandy. Despite not introducing Sandy to academic books about racism in the way that Hughes’ grandmother did for him,<sup>73</sup> Hager builds Sandy’s endurance to ensure that he can survive hard circumstances. Her storytelling about her own life experiences exemplifies this influence:

“For mighty nigh seventy years I been knowin’ both of ’em, an’ I ain’t never had no room in ma heart to hate neither white nor colored. When you starts hatin’ people, you gets uglier than they is”. (126)

Sandy turns this moral lesson from one who lived through slavery into practice. One example is when he gives his coupons to a white boy after an obviously racist situation prevents Sandy from entering a white children’s party in Stanton. Another is when he accepts Hager’s suggestion of wearing his mother’s shoes because he knows that his family cannot afford new ones. In increasing Sandy’s ability to endure such circumstances, Hager insists on making another Washington of Sandy, who she hopes will counter injustices by intellectual means. Earlier in the novel, she confesses to Sister Johnson:

“If de laws lets me live, I’s gwine make edicated man out o’ him. He’s gwine be another Booker T. Washington [...] so’s he can help this black race o’ our’n to come up and see de light and take they places in the world”. (97)

Hager is ambitious for Sandy to take on some of Washington’s politics so that he can work to change African American social circumstances without acting revolutionarily.

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<sup>71</sup> Susan M. George and Bette J. Dickerson, ‘The Role of Grandmother in Poor Single-Mother Families and Households’, in *African American Single Mothers: Understanding their Lives and Families*, ed. by Bette J. Dickerson (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 146-178 (p. 146).

<sup>72</sup> Kent, ‘Hughes and the Afro-American Folk Cultural Tradition’, 17-36 (p. 21).

<sup>73</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol.1, *1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 3-22 (p. 19).

As set out in his autobiography and elsewhere, one of Washington's policies to create a progressive path for African Americans was to encourage practical education, in agriculture and industry for example, which could connect them to American society.<sup>74</sup> Hager's dream for Sandy to become another Washington reveals that she herself embodies some of Washington's ideas rather than those of a 'mammy'. Just before her death, in an emotional scene with symbolic meanings, Hager creates a complementary connection between herself, Sandy, and Harriett for the sake of Sandy's education. Harriett has a gold watch, which Hager gave her as a birthday's present early in the novel, and when Harriett decide to 'run away with the carnival' Hager pawns it (163). Hager explains: "'cause I wanted you to have it fo' yo'self" (164). While Hager here wants Harriett to keep her possessions for herself, the way she returns the watch to Harriett involves Sandy literally and figuratively. Hager asks Sandy to hand her the 'little box' which contains Harriett's 'tiny gold watch' (163). While Hager pawns the watch so her daughter will not sell it, at this moment, she believes that Harriett who finances herself and Sandy who is at the age of entering a high school can continue her dream of advancing the boy's education, a dream that Hughes obliquely hints at by referring to the watch in particular. This object symbolises the money Harriet possesses and later spends on Sandy's education aiming to fulfil in future Hager's dream of benefiting African American proletarian people through Sandy's education. This last scene in Hager's life confirms that, like the grandfather in Ellison's later novel who admits on his death bed that his meekness towards the whites was a form of resistance, her servitude and deference to whites was a mask under which lay her rejection of racism and classism. Speaking from behind a pious mask and exhibiting more political motivation than a stereotypical 'mammy', Hager sees Sandy's education, like Washington's, as a vehicle to resist social inequalities.

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<sup>74</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, p. 30.

By granting Hager a significant role in his protagonist's development and imbuing her with a strong sense of social responsibility, Hughes' deepens his representation of an African American laundress grandmother. Four years before the publication of *Not Without Laughter*, a 1926 issue of *Crisis* featured a questionnaire called 'The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed'. The magazine was edited by Du Bois who criticised Washington for his non-confrontational policies.<sup>75</sup> In answering Du Bois' questionnaire, Hughes writes, 'What's the use of saying anything — the true literary artist is going to write about what he chooses anyway regardless of outside opinions'.<sup>76</sup> In *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes puts this idea into practice, for he disregards external norms and portrays Hager as living behind the Washingtonian mask of patience, morality, and endurance. Her acceptance of working as a laundress and her dream of seeing Sandy turn into another Washington imply that she conceals a rejection of social injustices, therefore challenging the 'mammy' stereotype.

### **Annjee, a Travelling Mother with Fewer Hopes for Her Son**

Hager exhibits social responsibility when declaring her dream of making a well-reared, educated man of Sandy so that he can help African American proletarians. In contrast, Annjee, although she is the boy's mother, withdraws herself from the responsibility of raising Sandy and of encouraging his education. A late chapter in the novel, entitled 'Elevator', postulates that Annjee is 'different, less far-seeing than her mother had been, less full of hopes for her son, not ambitious of him' (209). Annjee endures a burdened work experience like Hager, yet her influence on Sandy is ironically manifested through her absence from the family home and later from Stanton where the family lives. This experience is like that of Hughes' own mother, Carolyn Clark, who travelled to Chicago to find herself a good job and

<sup>75</sup> See Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 12-32; 84-101 (pp. 86-7; 94).

<sup>76</sup> 'The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed', in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, eds. by Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 190-203 (p. 192).



who, accordingly, offered Hughes, whom she left in his grandmother's care, a space to release his literary imagination.<sup>77</sup> This section discusses how Annjee, who neither obviously exhibits nor masks race or class awareness as Hager does, is an alternative to the 'matriarch' stereotype which regards African American mothers as domineering,<sup>78</sup> and how she, like Clark, indirectly facilitates her son's intellectual development.

While working hard as a cook for her white mistress, Mrs Rice, Annjee gives Sandy several commands, such as:

"listen here! I want you to come out to Mis' Rice's this evening and help me get through the dishes so's I can start home early, in time to wash and dress myself to go to the lodge hall. You hears me?" (41)

She later tells him "Here, wipe these dishes, boy!" (46). The harshness of these orders echoes Mrs Rice's commands to Annjee: "I wish you wouldn't put quite so much onion in your sauce for the steak. I've mentioned it to you several times" (46). By similarly ordering Sandy, Annjee shows herself as an authoritarian mother. However, she is not entirely bound by this stereotype, for she refuses a mother's duty of raising her son. Annjee is a perfect example of Hughes' desire to blur traditional representations of African Americans, a desire which may have been influenced by his friend, Aaron Douglas. Five years before *Not Without Laughter's* appearance, in 1925, Hughes received a letter from Douglas, a leading Harlem Renaissance visual artist and an editor of *Opportunity* magazine, in which Douglas emphasised the necessity of deepening African American representations.<sup>79</sup> Douglas wrote to Hughes that artists need to go 'into the very depth of the souls of our people and drag from the material crude, rough, neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it [...] Let's create something

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<sup>77</sup> See Regennia N. Williams and Carmaletha M. Williams, 'The Letters from Carrie Hughes Clark to Langston Hughes, 1928-1938', in *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, eds. by John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 106-124; Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol.1, 1902-1941: *I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 3-22.

<sup>78</sup> Georgoudaki, 'Audre Lorde: Revising Stereotypes of Afro-American Womanhood', 47-66 (p. 48).

<sup>79</sup> See Lowery Stokes Sims, *Challenges of the Modern: African American Artists 1925-1945* (New York: Studio Museum in the Harlem, 2003), 70.

transcendentally material, mystically objective'.<sup>80</sup> In accordance with Douglas' suggestion here, Hughes avoided writing constructed caricatures by choosing not to show only African Americans' dignity or primitiveness, and, rather, to blur these features in his novel. Annjee, for instance, although she experiences a double racial and proletarian burden when serving her white mistress, never considers Sandy's advancement in general. She, further, does not desire Sandy's dependence on her, and this feature differentiates her from 'matriarchs' who want their children to remain under their authority.

Not dissimilarly to Hughes' own mother, Annjee gives up her societally expected role as a mother. Before following her unemployed husband to Detroit, Annjee says to Hager:

"Couldn't he [Sandy] stay with you, mama? And then maybe we'd come back here and live, Jimboy and me, some time, when we get a little money ahead". (120)

Annjee's relationship with Sandy here, in contrast to Hager's, is based on the boy's taking care of himself rather than on supporting his education. This relationship also contrasts Annjee with 'matriarchs', the controlling mothers whose image appears in the novel's earlier lyric, 'Thro yo' arms around me, baby' (33). In fact, Annjee is a highly irresponsible mother even more than the mother persona in Hughes' 1931 song, 'Mother to Son'. This song's maternal figure, addressing her son, acknowledges that life for her 'ain't been no crystal stair' yet she tends to hold her son up: 'Don't you fall now—/[...]/ For I'se still goin', honey'.<sup>81</sup> It was this way that African American mothers often followed in the early twentieth century to make what sociologist Edward Frazier calls 'tremendous sacrifices to give their children an education'.<sup>82</sup> In contrast to this image, Annjee's relationship with Sandy becomes like that of Hughes and his own mother, who spent her days searching for better jobs and rarely devoted

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<sup>80</sup> qtd., in *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>81</sup> Hughes, 'Mother to Son', in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems*, p. 60.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 447-475 (p. 473).

much time to him.<sup>83</sup> Arnold Rampersad, Hughes' biographer, reflects on this relationship: 'Far from hating his mother, Hughes loved her hopelessly. In turn, she undoubtedly loved him, if in her way'.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps due to this real-life experience, *Not Without Laughter* complicates traditional mother-and-son relationships. The novel features a narrative experience wherein Hughes' narrator, to borrow Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's view about the characteristics of autobiographical writings, either represents multiple sides of the author's personal experiences or limits them to a certain degree.<sup>85</sup> By fictionalising memories from his childhood about his own mother, Hughes indicates that, just like his relationship with his mother, Annjee's relationship with Sandy is far from stereotypical.

Due to economic necessity, the traveling of African American mothers was not uncommon in the early decades of the twentieth century, when masses of African Americans moved from the South to cities like Chicago to seek better life condition.<sup>86</sup> While Hughes' novel is not a "Great Migration" narrative movement to Chicago,<sup>87</sup> within its story, which takes place between Kansas, Michigan and Illinois, it does portray a mother's, and later her son's, departure to Chicago, and this absence influences her son's development. Annjee's travel from Stanton to Detroit and Chicago fosters Sandy's intellectual individuation. Initially, it gives Sandy a chance to live in his eldest aunt's, Tempy's house, wherein the boy reads, studies, and stays awake until late hours in the nights thinking about "the war, and

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<sup>83</sup> Regennia N. Williams and Carmaletta M. Williams, 'The Letters from Carrie Hughes Clark to Langston Hughes, 1928–1938', in *Montage of a Dream*, 106–124 (p. 107).

<sup>84</sup> Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 3–22 (p. 4).

<sup>85</sup> These characteristics include the inclusion of fragmented elements from their writers' memories, experiences, identities, spaces, embodiments, and agencies. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives: Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 21–62 (pp. 21–2); 235–252 (p. 236).

<sup>86</sup> See James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 110; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 65.

<sup>87</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin uses the term 'migration narratives' to describe the texts which portray social injustices, such as the lynching, in the South as a reason behind African American people's migration into the North (*Who Set You Flowin?*, p. 25). The key examples Griffin provides to explain 'migration narratives' from the depression era are Richard Wright's 1938 collection of stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, and his 1941 documentary photo-text book *12 Million Black Voices* (p. 30).

white folk, and God, and girls, and—O, I don't know—everything in general" (186). This stage of "think[ing] too much" influences a later stage in Sandy's development (186), when the boy goes to Chicago, not to pursue working as Annjee wants from him, but to decide to continue his education to become a writer by associating himself with his singer aunt. Crucially, Hughes' biographer notes that the writer's own artistic individuation was influenced by Clark's traveling from one place to another. 'Feeling his mother's absence as rejection', Rampersad writes, 'Langston dropped deeper and deeper into fantasy'.<sup>88</sup> There are obvious connections between Clark's absence and Annjee's, which prompts Sandy's critical thinking over numerous issues and signals the beginning of his thinking as a creative writer, and this distinguishes Annjee from stereotypical mothers, for she never encourages Sandy's reliance on her.

### **Tempy, a Class Transgressor with Double Race/Class Awareness**

The portrayal of Tempy is more politicised than that of Annjee or Hager. Tempy feels embarrassed by the apron Hager wears, which indicates that she is a servant; keeps specific African American texts, which formulate her race and class awareness; and wants to become closer to white middle-class people in order to increase her own social status. Further, in a climactic scene when Sandy compares Du Bois' greatness to Washington's, Tempy's response is indirectly political: "Take Du Bois for your model, not some white folks' nigger" (175). Tempy here contrasts with Annjee, who never exhibits proletarian African American awareness, and to Hager, who, from behind a mammy's mask, wants Sandy to become another Washington.

Class mobility, through the emulation of the white upper class, is Tempy's means to implicitly resist race and class constraints. Tempy, further, reflects the double social

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<sup>88</sup> Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 3-22 (p. 14).

consciousness that Du Bois writes about in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this collection of essays, Du Bois criticises Washington's encouragement of enduring racial prejudice from the mid to late nineteenth century. Meanwhile, he acknowledges that double consciousness is a state of existence for all African Americans, regardless of where they sit on the political spectrum. Du Bois explains,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two wearing ideals in one body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>89</sup>

Tempy demonstrates a similar 'twoness' and, further, she hides her revolutionary attitudes as she tells Sandy her preference for Du Bois over Washington. Eventually deciding to emulate both intellectuals, Sandy, as discussed later in this section, is on his way to becoming Hughes rather than Washington or Du Bois. This section first discusses how Tempy is depicted not as an 'Amazon' who is rebellious against the whites,<sup>90</sup> but as a woman who masks her race/class awareness by elevating her social status. Then it investigates how her influence on Sandy is more complex than that of Hager.

Tempy's political beliefs are indicated in several ways in *Not Without Laughter*, and one of these ways is through her possession of African American texts. In a middle chapter in the novel called 'A Shelf of Books', it becomes clear that Tempy keeps few African American publications for reasons that are not directly political:

Tempy had a case full of dusty volumes that were used to give dignity to her sitting-room [...] The Negro was represented by Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars*, and the *Complete Poems* of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, whom Tempy tolerated on account of his

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<sup>89</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 12-32 (pp. 16-17).

<sup>90</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho*, p.154.

fame, but condemned because he had written so much in dialect and so often of the lower classes of colored people [...] And in her sewing-room closet there was also a pile of *The New Crisis*, the thin Negro monthly that she had been taking from the beginning of its publication. (174)

The last sentence in this description points to a specific cultural movement in the early twentieth century wherein a large number of African American texts were published.<sup>91</sup> James P. Danky, in a contribution to *A History of the Book in America*, overviews some of these publications, including the magazines *Opportunity* and *Defender*, and clarifies that their goal at that time was to create an African American history and to inform their readers about issues like lynching and the lack of employment in the South.<sup>92</sup> *Crisis*, the Harlem Renaissance magazine which Du Bois edited and to which Hughes' novel refers, juxtaposes images, illustrations, and writings about African American achievements and struggles in contexts like lynching to call its readers to action.<sup>93</sup> That Tempy keeps 'a pile' of issues of this magazine indicates her awareness of oppression and resistance.

The other texts Tempy keeps for 'dignity' also embrace a political agenda, and Tempy's having read them, in spite of their use of the African American vernacular, exemplifies that she hides a protesting message to obliquely reject race and class injustices. The texts she has display what Houston Baker calls African American 'modernism'.<sup>94</sup> Dunbar and Du Bois, for example, as Baker argues, 'deforms' the mastery of the traditional

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<sup>91</sup> See James P. Danky, 'Reading, Writing, and Resisting African American Print Culture', in *A History of the Book in America*, vol 4, *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940*, eds. by Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 339-358.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 350-54.

<sup>93</sup> Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and The New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 20-54 (p. 24).

<sup>94</sup> Baker discusses Washington's *Up from Slavery*, Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Locke's *The New Negro*, arguing that they are attempts at expressing African Americans' culture through raising complicated issues, i.e., the use of modernism. Baker argues that Washington's text expresses the race's attitudes through public speaking, Du Bois' through spiritual songs, and Locke's through showing African American cultures behind the mask. See Baker, *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 3-10 (p. 4).

form (the technique of writing as though from behind a mask) through both using the vernacular and addressing African American proletarian issues.<sup>95</sup> Tempy's having on her bookshelf, in addition to Du Bois' *Crisis*, Dunbar's and Chesnutt's texts which in vernacular address African American struggles and aspirations is a masking activity, which recalls Hager's pretend satisfaction with her work, to hide social rebelliousness. Her possession of neither *Up from Slavery* by Washington, whom her mother admires, nor *The Souls of Black Folk* by the more radical Du Bois, whom she herself wants Sandy to emulate, promotes Tempy's defiant yet politicised act of hiding her resistance. James Scott contends that as a kind of resistance, people from subordinate groups display conduct or speeches, called 'infrapolitics' and 'disguises', which contradict hidden meanings or intentions.<sup>96</sup> 'Every subordinate group', writes Scott, 'creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant'.<sup>97</sup> Building on Scott's ideas in the context of African American experiences in particular, Robin Kelley maintains that African Americans chose to rebel against social injustices in the 1910s and early 1920s through 'unorganised, clandestine, and evasive' acts, such as robbery or attacking their employers' property.<sup>98</sup> These secret radical forms of resistance, or 'infrapolitics', conceal a submerged radicalism.<sup>99</sup> African American writings which use the vernacular, like those on Tempy's bookshelf, function similarly – like a 'hidden transcript' which encodes political attitudes.<sup>100</sup>

Tempy masks her responsibility towards African Americans by taking any opportunity to become closer to the white middle class:

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<sup>95</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 25; p. 32.

<sup>96</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 17-44 (p. 19).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, ix-xiv (p. xii).

<sup>98</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 1-13 (pp. 7-8).

<sup>99</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 19.

<sup>100</sup> See Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 27-65 (p. 35).

She had a woman to do the laundry and help with the cleaning [...] She got her [cooking] recipes from *The Ladies' Home Journal*. (171)

Tempy here acts like people of 'black skins [and] white masks'.<sup>101</sup> That she, the keeper of *Crisis*' issues, gets her recipes from a magazine which addresses middle-class, often white, women point to the idea of 'twoness'<sup>102</sup> which is certainly salient in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and in works by Dunbar and Richard Wright.<sup>103</sup> Wright speaks about it explicitly in a 1937 autobiographical essay, declaring that when he got a job he 'learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble [...] to play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live'.<sup>104</sup> Dualism becomes an African American means to reject social injustices.<sup>105</sup> In the much earlier poem 'We Wear the Mask' (1896), Dunbar, whose volume is on Tempy's bookshelf, maintains that African Americans pretend to be satisfied with their position: 'We wear the mask that grins and lies [...] We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries/To thee from tortured soul arise/We sing, but oh, the clay is vile'.<sup>106</sup> James Smethurst suggests that the point from Dunbar's poem about the discrepancy between what is concealed and revealed resembles Du Bois' analysis of social 'twoness', which *Invisible Man* later develops.<sup>107</sup> Dunbar's above-quoted lines, as if foreshadowing Ellison's "to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins" (*IM*, p. 16), also point to Du Bois' concept of double

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<sup>101</sup> I quote here the title of the philosopher Franz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, as translated from French. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

<sup>102</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (p. 16).

<sup>103</sup> See Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism*, 27-65.

<sup>104</sup> Richard Wright, 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch', *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2003), p. 13.

<sup>105</sup> Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, follows in a third-person narrative Bigger Thomas', a murderer and rapist of a white woman, conflicted stream of consciousness. Bigger, living in poverty in Chicago's South side, practices the masking demeanour whenever treating the white family to whom he works as a driver and whose daughter he murders. 'The thing to do', the narrator unfolds Bigger's thoughts, 'was to act just like others acted, lived like they lived, and while they were not looking, do what you wanted' (106). Cultural historian Bill V. Mullen points out that in this novel Wright, who broke with the Communist Party by 1942, is concerned with abolishing racism and embarking an African American popular front in Chicago wherein racist segregation continued, instead of following the American popular front of communists which disappointed him. See Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 19-43 (pp. 31-7); Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005).

<sup>106</sup> qtd., in Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 14-34 (p. 15).

<sup>107</sup> Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism*, 27-65 (33; 39).



consciousness. In *Not Without Laughter*, Tempy is the first to mention Du Bois' name. Furthermore, she is the one who tells Sandy that Du Bois seeks 'social equality', reality, and dignity for African Americans (*NWL*, 175). In this regard, when taking her cooking recipes from *Ladies' Home Journal*, the target audience of which was white women from the middle class,<sup>108</sup> she challenges socially assigned norms.

Assimilating to white middle-class culture is Tempy's strategy of resistance, the mask by which she shows that her people can ignore racial and classed confines:

Colored people certainly needed to come up in the world, Tempy thought, up to the level of white people—dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people—and then they would no longer be called 'niggers'. (171)

*The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), which is on Tempy's bookshelf, reflects much of her interest in detaching herself from both her class and race. Like Chesnutt's light-skinned protagonist Rena, Tempy aspires to rise above her poverty and blackness, thus veiling her social attitudes. She wants herself and the readers of her books – like Sandy – to see African Americans through Chesnutt's perspective – that is, as having the potential to change their social positions when rebellious intentions are unspoken. Light-skinned women, like Rena, whom Tempy reads about, encounter complex racism because of their double racial identities.<sup>109</sup> However, Rena looks for better opportunities as she uses her light complexion as a means to detach herself from her African American and proletarian identity.<sup>110</sup> The fact that Tempy reads about such characters helps to reveal her conflicting desires: to escape her limited position and to disclose her silent rejection of social discrimination.

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<sup>108</sup> Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber, *American Popular Culture Through History: The 1920s* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 176.

<sup>109</sup> Cherene Sherrard-Johnson uses the term 'New Negro women' to describe the Harlem Renaissance 'mulattas', and argues that these women encounter sexual and racial struggles within the coloured and the whites. Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007), p. xix.

<sup>110</sup> See Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1958), 29-50 (p. 36).

Neither simply conforming to subordination to the whites nor explicitly rebelling against this position, Tempy confuses the 'Amazon' stereotype. This split position manifests itself through her desire for Sandy to emulate Du Bois rather than Washington. When she hears Sandy say that he wants to become a writer like Washington, Tempy's response signifies her political intentions:

"Teaching Negroes to be servants, that's all Washington did! [...] Du Bois wants our rights. He wants us to be real men and women. He believes in a social equality. But Washington—huh!" (175)

Du Bois himself labelled Washington a 'compromizer' and he attacked his call for African Americans' 'peaceful cooperation'.<sup>111</sup> Tempy criticises Washington's procedures, too, and Hughes' narrator makes this point more specifically: 'The fact that he had established an industrial school damned Washington in Tempy's eyes, for there were enough colored workers already' (175). Apparently rejecting this African American subordination Tempy hides revolutionary attitudes which are similar to those of Du Bois.

Despite seemingly rejecting Washington's call for cooperation, Tempy paradoxically embraces his ideas about living with white people without hostility as a way to change her social position. Like Washington, who wrote his autobiography in formal English, she wants Sandy to speak grammatically correctly, thus rejecting the use of African American dialect in order to become closer to the whites:

-"You needn't say 'yes'm' in this house. We are not used to slavery talk here."

-"It don't stay fastened."

"It doesn't, James!" (169)

-"No'm, I ain't," said Sandy.

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<sup>111</sup> Du Bois argues: 'Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races', since he made only Afro-Americans as responsible for the economic problems happening in the country's north and South. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 84-101 (pp. 86-7; 94).

“I haven’t,” she corrected him. “I certainly don’t want my white neighbors to hear you saying ‘ain’t’ [...] you must talk like a gentleman.” (173)

What is significant in this passage about Tempy’s correction of Sandy’s folk voice is its mixture of standard English and African American vernacular. Through the modernist technique of blending ‘high’ and ‘popular’ language,<sup>112</sup> Hughes conveys a twofold message. The emulation of white people which Tempy expects from Sandy is a contradictory act. It clashes with her target of forming Sandy into a Du Boisian ‘New Negro’. Within this contradiction, Tempy wants Sandy to mask his identity towards his race and class as she herself does – by rejecting the use of the vernacular yet reading texts that use it, and by admiring Du Bois for his belief in ‘social equality’ (175) while seeking to rise above one’s own race and class. By embracing ideas by Du Bois but avoiding direct radicalism, Tempy encourages Sandy to resist social inequalities in ideas rather than through rebellious actions.

Hughes’ representation of Tempy and her masked radicalism more broadly is neither stereotyped nor dignified. In his *Nation* article, Hughes, who repudiated Du Bois’ emphasis on portraying dignified representations of African Americans, criticised the African American artists who portrayed their people in ways conforming to white conceptions. He writes:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> See Smethurst, *New Red Negro*, 116-143 (p. 126).

<sup>113</sup> ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’, 31-6 (p. 36).

A similar aim of indirectly denying external limitations manifests itself when Tempy introduces Sandy to books in which ‘The Negro was represented by Chesnut’s *House Behind the Cedars*, and the *Complete Poems* of Paul Lawrence Dunbar’ (174). These volumes, which use the vernacular and address the ideas of masking and social advancement, portray both African American dignity and primitiveness. To utilise Hughes’ phrase from his *Nation* article, they present ‘the tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs’ to encode, as Hughes does in Tempy’s representation, their protest against social confines.

Tempy’s dual lifestyle shapes Sandy’s decision to model both Du Bois and Washington. Resisting Tempy’s contradictory ideas, Sandy associates himself with proletarian African Americans. By looking at ‘the pictures of prominent Negroes and reading about racial activities’ in *Crisis*, which was edited by Du Bois, Sandy learns quickly about ‘racial wrongs in the South’ (174). Likewise, after reading Washington’s *Up from Slavery* without his aunt’s knowledge, he realises that ‘Booker T. was dead, but he had left a living school in the South’ (188). Paying attention to this achievement, the one that Tempy ‘damned’ Washington for, Sandy nuances his proletarian views from Tempy’s (175).<sup>114</sup> Sandy ultimately synthesises Tempy’s and Hager’s contrasting views about which writer – Du Bois or Washington – to model, and he concludes: “I guess they are both great men” (175). Sandy here reconciles two philosophies – that of ‘social equality’, demonstrated by Du Bois and introduced to Sandy by Tempy, and that of endurance, shown by Washington and Hager. Although Du Bois and Washington embody different philosophies, they share, much like Tempy and Hager, a similar goal: encouraging education to address social struggles. As Cary Wintz affirms, both Du Bois and Washington ‘were committed to uplifting their race,

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<sup>114</sup> Washington was among the first who found that opening a school for the coloureds is a means to ‘lift these people up’ (*Up from Slavery*, 56). In order to open the school, he suggested the race’s education to be connected to agriculture, to lessen hostility with the whites, who wanted Afro-Americans to keep their agricultural works (57). Justifying the reasons of suggesting this education for the coloureds, Washington writes: ‘We wanted to teach them to study actual things instead of mere books alone’ (60).

instilling racial pride, and securing political and civil rights'.<sup>115</sup> Sandy, considering the greatness of both writers, is expected to address African American proletarian issues when becoming an intellectual.

Notably, some writers, like Du Bois, believed that African American writers should not represent their people as subordinates, and Robert A. Bone explains that the New Negro writer 'had decisively rejected the slavemindedness which taught the Old Negro to know his place'.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, Alain Locke's *The New Negro* anthology, which juxtaposes visual, written, and lyrical as well as documentary African American texts, is an endeavour to resist generalisations about African American identity.<sup>117</sup> In the anthology's introduction, Locke declares:

The day of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is equally gone [...] it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts.<sup>118</sup>

Locke here encourages a creation of nonstereotyped images of African Americans,<sup>119</sup> deviating from 'The Negro Renaissance' which, as Bone emphasises, 'was essentially a period of self-discovery, marked by a sudden growth of interest in things Negro'.<sup>120</sup> Distinct from both the New Negro and the Negro Renaissance writers, Hughes depicts proletarian African Americans as neither perfect nor stereotypical. In an article from the mid-1930s, Hughes fuses African American challenges with proletarian issues by proclaiming:

We want a new and better America, where there won't be any poor, where there won't be any more Jim Crow, where there won't be any lynchings, where there won't be any

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<sup>115</sup> Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Huston: Rice UP, 1988), 30-47 (p. 44).

<sup>116</sup> Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 29-50 (p. 33).

<sup>117</sup> Carroll, *Word, Image, and The New Negro*, 156-190 (p. 190).

<sup>118</sup> Locke, *The New Negro*, 3-16 (p. 5).

<sup>119</sup> Sterling Brown maintains that the New Negro, 'was marked by self-respect (which, admittedly at times, became self-peering) and by self-reliance. He asked for less charity and more justice' (*Negro Poetry*, 60).

<sup>120</sup> Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 53-64 (p. 62).

munition makers, where we won't need philanthropy, nor charity, nor the New Deal, nor Home Relief.<sup>121</sup>

Hughes, known as a 1930s Red and modernist African American poet,<sup>122</sup> here protests against systems that subordinate African American proletarians. In his novel, however, Hughes' protest is indirect and he reveals it through the fictionalised Sandy, who carries a similar responsibility.

Not unlike Hughes, Sandy reaches a balance between 'New Negro' and 'Negro Renaissance' when he realises that he can model writers with opposing attitudes: the New Negro Du Bois and, using Sterling Brown's apt word, the 'unmilitant' Washington.<sup>123</sup> Hughes' representation of Tempy, which is a contrast to the less socially aware Annjee and to Hager the Washingtonian, reinforces Sandy's increasing political awareness.

### **Harriett, an Entertainer with Masked Social Awareness**

Harriett, the youngest and most independent of Sandy's aunts, works as an entertainer in an hotel, dances to African American jazz and blues lines and in carnivals, and eventually becomes a popular blues singer in Chicago. Compared to the other women in the novel, she goes further to motivate Sandy to actualise Hager's dream of starting his education in order to become his people's representative. Harriett, who undertakes artistic professions and eventually funds Sandy's education, successfully hides her political attitudes behind the mask of primitiveness. It is notable that in 1926, four years before *Not Without Laughter's* publication, Hughes formed with other African American artists and intellectuals – including Aaron Douglas and Zora Neale Hurston – the 'Niggeratti' group that published the short-

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<sup>121</sup> Hughes, 'To Negro Writers', in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, 131-133 (p. 133).

<sup>122</sup> See Smethurst, *New Red Negro*, pp. 93-115.

<sup>123</sup> Brown, *Negro Poetry*, 17-48 (p. 48).

lived magazine, *Fire!!*.<sup>124</sup> This avant-garde magazine broke from New Negro demands by its focus on nonconventional themes – for example, sexuality<sup>125</sup> – and it sought to create a nuanced literary African American identity.<sup>126</sup> Hughes perhaps draws on his experience contributing to this magazine to portray Harriett, the character whose artistic performances encode her African American proletarian awareness. This section discusses Harriet’s representation and argues that she intensifies the novel’s masked proletarian content and its fragmented structure.

Over the course of the novel, Harriett passes through a series of stages in the process of casting off society’s expectations of her. Early in the novel, for instance, she decides to quit her work as a waitress at the Stanton Country Club in order to find a better paid and less insulting job in the hotel. She explains to Hager:

“All that work for five dollars a week with what little tips those pickers give you. And white men insulting you besides, asking you to sleep with ’em [...] washing and ironing table-linen, and then scrubbing the floor besides—that’s too much of a good thing! [...]

Maudel says I can get a job with her [...] At the Banks Hotel, chambermaid, for pretty good pay”. (27)

Harriett here, on the one hand, unlike Hager and Annjee, who never complain about the hardships they face when serving the whites, expresses her anger at the nature of her work as a waitress insulted by white men. On the other hand, the fact that she mocks the notion of white men exploiting her body while paying little implies her interest in transforming this position by evolving into a societally rebellious woman. Historian Jacqueline Jones points out that although the only two spheres available for African American women during the 1930s

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<sup>124</sup> Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, 25-47 (p. 34). Schwarz notes that ‘Instead of accepting a task of representation, the Niggeratti proclaimed that they were “primarily” and intensely devoted to art’ and they insisted that ‘their creations would interpret black Americans to themselves’ (*Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, 34).

<sup>125</sup> Carroll, *Word, Image, and The New Negro*, 191-227 (205).

<sup>126</sup> Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 64-86 (p. 82); Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, 25-47 (p. 44; 46).

were domestic service and agriculture, some girls broke from these traditional roles by working as blues singers and dancers.<sup>127</sup> Jones maintains, ‘it was the entertainment field that fueled the dreams of black girls who yearn for a life’s work of glamour and triumph’.<sup>128</sup> Even before working as such, Harriett seeks to oppose her mother’s model. Once deciding to work in the hotel, she responds harshly to Hager, who tells her that hotels are places wherein ‘strumpets’ work (28). Fighting back, Harriett rebukes Hager by calling her an “old Christian fool!” (32), and by telling her that the church has made the elderly African Americans act like the “Salvation Army” (30).<sup>129</sup> Through these responses, Harriett tends to reject subordination by non-traditional means which Hager regards as immoral.

Hughes was not the only writer to address the perceived immorality of some African American women’s careers. His contemporary Claude McKay, who was involved with leftist politics and the Harlem artistic and political renaissance,<sup>130</sup> depicts in a 1928 novel, *Home to Harlem*, African American female entertainers as sexual objects. The novel’s narrator describes how dancer and cabaret singer Rose sensually dances to attract the protagonist’s attention:

She stopped more than usual at Jake’s table. He gave her a half dollar. She danced a jaggig jig before him that made the giggles rise like a wave in the room. (*HH*, 32)

The depiction of primitiveness is obvious here, and Du Bois, who opposed the depiction of African Americans as savages or as sensual beings,<sup>131</sup> critiqued *Home to Harlem* in *Crisis*, arguing that ‘after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath’.<sup>132</sup> *Not*

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<sup>127</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 196-231 (p. 220).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>129</sup> The religious organisation Harriet mentions here and which appeared in the late nineteenth century demanded ‘many personal sacrifices’ from working-class people. See Lillian Taiz, *Hallelujah Lads and Lasses: Remarking the Salvation Army in America, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1-10 (p. 9).

<sup>130</sup> James A. Miller, ‘African American Writing of the 1930s: A Prologue’, in *Radical Revisions*, 78-90 (p. 88).

<sup>131</sup> Du Bois, ‘Criteria of Negro Art’, 100-105.

<sup>132</sup> qtd., in. Wayne F. Cooper, ‘Forward to the 1987 Edition’, *Home to Harlem* (Boston: North Eastern UP, 1987), p. xviii.



*Without Laughter* presents much less explicit imagery than *Home to Harlem*, but Hughes still portrays Harriett as a sexualised entertainer. Harriett, whom both Hager and the narrator call ‘wild’ because she challenges her mother’s moral demands, hides political attitudes against her people’s and her own social position (17; 22). In violating Hager’s command of not working in the hotel, for example, Harriet rejects traditional African American acquiescence to religion and she denies the political superior-inferior relationship between white and African Americans behind the mask of her work as an entertainer.

Dancing to African American jazz music enables Harriett to deepen this indirect rejection of social inequalities. When hearing the jazz Jimboy plays, Harriett forgets herself in dancing, ‘her hands picking imaginative cherries out of the stars, her hips speaking an earthly language quite their own’ (34). Harriett’s stance here resembles that of a primitive persona whom Hughes describes in a 1921 jazz lyric called ‘Poem’:

All the tom-toms of the jungle beat in my blood,  
All the wild hot moons of the jungles shine in my soul. I am afraid of this civilization--  
So hard,  
So strong,  
So cold.<sup>133</sup>

Another Harlem Renaissance poem by Hughes, called ‘Jazzonia’, published first in *The New Crisis* and republished later in Locke’s *The New Negro* and in Hughes’ *The Weary Blues*, portrays a female dancer:

Oh, silver tree!  
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!  
In a Harlem cabaret  
Six long-headed jazzers play  
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold

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<sup>133</sup> Hughes, ‘Poem’, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems*, p. 57.

Lifts high a dress of silken gold.<sup>134</sup>

Although this poem does not appear in *Not Without Laughter*, its protagonist bears striking similarities to Harriett, predominantly because they are both jazz dancers. Harriett here, in Kimberly J. Banks' commentary on her work in the hotel, 'is firmly inscribed and sexualized within [racial] boundaries'.<sup>135</sup> While generally performing the sensual nature of dancing, though, the music to which Harriett dances encoded a social goal. During times of 'cultural suppression' and racial segregation, as Ben Sidran notes, African American music started as 'a potential foundation for social activity',<sup>136</sup> and it functioned as a means for expressing African American feelings, fears, needs, and commitments.<sup>137</sup> 'Black music', writes Sidran, 'was a direct reflection of the combined experiences of many individuals, all of them grounded in reality'.<sup>138</sup> Harriet, dancing to jazz music, which Hughes associates with primitiveness in his early poems, seems to carry similar inclinations, the expressing of the needs and fears of African Americans under race and class conditions.

The novel's integration of lyrical and prose elements in this dancing scene adds depth to Harriett's character. Anne Elizabeth Carroll examines notable 1910s-1920s African American publications that integrate visual, written, lyrical and documentary texts, including magazines like *Crisis*, *Opportunity* and *Fire!!*, as well as *The New Negro* anthology. She argues that the structural design of these texts helps the reader understand the realities and complexities of the African American identity rather than the stereotypes which wider society had assigned to it. In her discussion of the integrated texts, poems, essays, and songs in *The New Negro*, Carroll maintains that such a multi-genred combination 'give[s] readers insight

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<sup>134</sup> Hughes, 'Jazzonia', in *The New Negro*, ed. by Alain Locke (Atheneum: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), p. 226.

<sup>135</sup> Kimberly J. Banks, 'Gender Performance and Sexual Subjectivity in *Not Without Laughter*: Sandy's Emergent Masculinity', in *Montage of a Dream*, 86-105 (p. 94).

<sup>136</sup> Sidran, *Black Talk*, xiii-xxv (p. xxi).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-29 (17).

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

into the inner lives of African Americans. A combination of different kinds of texts, then, offer the fullest portrayal of African American identity'.<sup>139</sup> Hughes' novel, through its similar structure, deepens Harriett's identity, for Harriett's dancing to jazz music suggests her masking of her commitment to African Americans. The novel's narrator describes Harriett's response to the jazz: 'Harriett began to ball-the-jack, her arms flopping like the wings of a headless pigeon' (39). Harriett is outwardly wild and having fun while, like the 'headless pigeon' that wants to fly, she buries her anger at the conditions with which her people and she herself struggle.

The novel's narrative-poetic structure also explores the role of stereotyping, especially when Harriett performs the blues lines that respond to Jimboy's lines, 'O, yo' windin' an' yo' grindin'', which – as discussed earlier in this chapter – address the female persona as 'primitive' (34). The song's female character responds with 'I see that you don't want me' (34). Through the repetition of the line, 'I see that you don't want me', the stereotyped role of Harriett, the song's representative, becomes a mask. Hazel Carby, looking at stereotypes in African American female-authored texts published during and after slavery time, argues that 'the objective of stereotype is not to reflect or to represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations'.<sup>140</sup> Although Hughes' patron wanted him to 'be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive' while writing, Hughes avoided this suggestion.<sup>141</sup> Reflecting on this experience in his 1940 autobiography, he argues: 'I was only an American Negro [...] but I was not Africa'.<sup>142</sup> Harriett is like Hughes, who identifies himself with America more than with Africa or perceived primitiveness, and who thus felt a need to create a new sort of woman who also

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<sup>139</sup> Carroll, *Word, Image, and The New Negro*, 156-190 (p. 171).

<sup>140</sup> Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 20-39 (p. 22)

<sup>141</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 324-26 (p. 325).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

identifies less with stereotypical African American women. The sexuality indicated in the above song is 'a disguise', to use Carby's parlance, to counteract women's subordination to men's expectations that women are merely sexually driven objects. The fact that Hughes integrates this song into a narrative about proletarian struggles demonstrates that Harriett is not simplified like the stereotype presented in the lyrics that Jimboy performs.

Dancing to other blues lines of similarly ambiguous meaning is a masked method Harriett uses to reject the African American proletariat's subordination to upper-class whites. In the 'Guitar' chapter, which includes numerous blues songs sung by Jimboy, the narrator assumes that Harriett's dancing is superficial:

It was all great fun, and innocent fun except when one stopped to think, as white folks did, that some of the blues lines had, not only double, but triple meanings, and some of the dance steps required very definite movements of the hips. But neither Harriett nor Jimboy soiled their minds by thinking. (36)

There is an irony in the narration here about what Harriett and Jimboy do and what they do not know. The apparent purpose of Harriett's dancing, for instance, is to have fun and to move her body, just like any other dancer. In addition to this narrative description, however, Hughes merges Harriett's dancing to lyrics recited by Jimboy, like the one stating, 'A woman down in Georgia/got her two sweet-men confused' (39). Within this integration, Harriett's dancing, like the linguistic nature of blues lyrics, carries surface and latent intentions. In tracing African American popular mediums of expression developed during slavery and later, historian Lawrence Levine maintains:

although blues songs were individual expression they were meant to be shared, they were meant to evoke experiences common to the group, they were meant to provide

relief and release for all involved. And, the point is, all present *were* involved for black musical performances properly speaking had no audience, just participants.<sup>143</sup>

Poet and literary critic LeRoi Jones, in discussing the significance of blues lyrics for African Americans, also emphasises that '[b]lues was a music that arose from the needs of a group, although it was assumed that each man had his own blues and that he would sing them'.<sup>144</sup> Harriett who dances to Jimboy's blues, aims at triple targets: the fun of dancing, the sexual and sensual movement of her body, and the collective African American and proletarian awareness which she hides in her dancing. In effect, her dancing to the blues, which is known for its double – literal and figurative – signification, and which literally depicts primitive women, like in the lyrics recited by Jimboy, demonstrates her intention to remove herself and her African American audience from unexpressed social struggles.

The title *Not Without Laughter* is code for this political message, calling for living with laughter, which indicates a masked rebelliousness against race and class discrimination. The literal laughter in the title functions as a figurative means through which African Americans respond to racial and classed marginality. Commenting on Hughes' ambiguous use of the word 'laugh' in *The Big Sea*, Vera M. Kutzinski remarks that 'laughter can signify understanding and intimacy just as it can indicate unease',<sup>145</sup> for laughter can refer literally to being at ease or rhetorically to being in sadness or anger. Henry Louis Gates discusses how African Americans speak rhetorically to signify their interpretations, and argues: 'Signifyin(g) presupposes an "encoded" intention to say one thing but to mean quite another'.<sup>146</sup> Laughter functions in this way in Hughes' novel. By the novel's close, Sandy, who becomes perplexed over poverty's relationship to working as entertainers, comes to the

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<sup>143</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 190-297 (p. 237). Levine also postulates that 'Blues and other forms of secular song were not only ways of articulating troubles, they were also a means of exorcising them, or at least their effects' (p. 257).

<sup>144</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Quill, 1963), 81-94 (p. 82).

<sup>145</sup> Vera M. Kutzinski, *The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2012), 15-55 (p. 38). To note, Le Roi Jones later changed his name to Amiri Baraka.

<sup>146</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44-88 (p. 82).

conclusion:

But was that why Negroes were poor, because they were dancers, jazzers, clowns? . . .

The other way around would be better: dancers because of their poverty; singers because suffered; laughing all the time because they must forget. (211)

Laughing to forget, here as it is throughout the novel, stands for entertainment yet to conceal a desire to challenge social confines. This laughter prefigures the unspoken reason behind the fictionalised Southern migrant Rose's mysterious smile by the end of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* when Rose, as examined in Chapter Four, breastfeeds a starving man to save his life. Laughter in the title of Hughes' novel signifies a political message Hughes has not clearly expressed.

Harriett elevates the act of figurative laughter by dancing in carnivals where people from various social backgrounds gather and by later singing blues lyrics that encode revolutionary meanings. The chapter 'Carnival' describes the carnival as a gathering spot where African Americans sing and dance in front of white and African American people from all classes:

A big white man in a checkered vest was leaning against the piano, derby on head, and a long cigar stuck in his mouth. He was watching a slim black girl, with skirts held high and head thrown back, prancing in a mad circle of crazy steps. Two big colored boys in red uniforms were patting time, while another girl sat on a box, her back towards the peeping youngsters staring up from under the edge of the tent. As the girl who was dancing whirled about, Sandy saw that it was Harriett. (74)

As the passage shows, the carnival draws a diverse group of people, and both performers and their audience obviate from the socially discriminating norms that they follow in their day-to-day lives. For the literary theorist Mikhail M. Bakhtin, who examines the distinctive meaning of carnival in his 1929 study on Dostoevsky's literature, the carnival is a fertile cultural environment that situates performers and spectators from different classes, sexes, and

sometimes races in the same position.<sup>147</sup> Bakhtin writes, ‘In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act’.<sup>148</sup> ‘Carnivalistic life’, he continues, is ‘drawn out of its (usual) rut, it is to some extent “life turned inside out,” “the reverse side of the world”’.<sup>149</sup> In this reversed sphere, norms of ordinary life are transgressed.<sup>150</sup> Carnival for Bakhtin, as for Hughes, situates heterogeneous attendees within the same context, thus promoting the rejection of social hierarchies.

Through her dancing in such a context, Harriett positions herself alongside people who are neither African Americans nor proletarians. Through this amalgamation, and from behind a mask of laughter, she resists social circumscriptions. Hughes’ narrator mentions that when Sandy goes to the carnival he listens to music which he regards as ‘the saddest music in the world’ (77). That Harriet dances to another music in this cultural gathering and specifically, in one instance, ‘in front of a big fat white man in a checkered vest while a Negro in a red suit played the piano’, signifies her masking of resistance against racial oppression (*NWL*, 75). During the time in which Hughes’ novel is set, dancing in groups functioned as a vehicle for African Americans to hide their rejection of social injustices.<sup>151</sup> The cultural historian Nathan Huggins points to the hidden intentions in African American performances of this kind:

The stereotype—the mask—defined the Afro-American as white Americans chose to see him; outside the mask, the black man was either invisible or threatening. Negroes

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<sup>147</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky’s Works’, 101-180 (120-3).

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-180 (p. 122).

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>150</sup> Bakhtin writes: ‘The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is non carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes in to effect: *free and familiar contact among people*’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 122-3).

<sup>151</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 35-53 (p. 51).

accepting the pretense, wore the mask to move in and out of the white world with safety and profit.<sup>152</sup>

Robin Kelley uses the word ‘congregation’ to explain how environments such as ‘dance halls’ enable African Americans ‘to enact a sense of solidarity; to fight with each other; to maintain and struggle over a collective memory of oppression and pleasure, degradation and dignity’.<sup>153</sup> James Scott similarly proposes that the carnival was the place where people from lower classes had the opportunity to ‘assemble in unprecedented numbers behind masks and make threatening gestures toward those who ruled in daily life’.<sup>154</sup> ‘Carnival’, Scott affirms, ‘in its ritual structure and anonymity, gives a privileged place to normally suppressed speech and aggression’.<sup>155</sup> Harriett’s carnival dancing does not embody this explicit aggression. Rather, to use Gates’ idea about signification in African American rhetorical narratives, in her dancing Harriett shows ‘one thing but to mean quite another’.<sup>156</sup> As when dancing to blues, in the carnival Harriett pretends to entertain her audience and figuratively laughs while hiding her anger at the conditions African Americans endure. While she never exhibits aggression against her white or bourgeois audience within the carnival sphere, Harriett’s carnival dancing masks her red attitudes.

Harriett also masters blues singing to articulate her revolutionary inclinations, and those of her people, from behind the mask of figurative speech. The fact that Hughes writes this novel with prose and blues lines makes his text indirectly political. Alfred Kazin, a critic of 1930s culture and proletarian writing, argues that in ‘crisis’ times, like the Depression era, social novelists used their ‘imaginings’ when writing about struggles rather than documenting the struggles as they were.<sup>157</sup> Christopher Bigsby, building on Kazin’s view

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<sup>152</sup> Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), p. 261.

<sup>153</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 35-53 (p. 51).

<sup>154</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 136-182 (p. 181).

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>156</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44-88 (p. 82).

<sup>157</sup> Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 485-518 (p. 490).



here, argues that African American autobiographies often narrate experiences more accurately than any other literary form of writing.<sup>158</sup> In his novel, Hughes incorporates both imagination and autobiography. The features of his novel which are driven by his imagination, such as characterising an aunt like Harriett,<sup>159</sup> he attempts to make political, such as when Harriett sings blues lyrics. Baker, who regards Washington's autobiography as a modernist African American text, proposes that 'the mastery of the form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee', indicating that this mastery addresses African American issues implicitly to advance the race's position in a non-revolutionary manner.<sup>160</sup> It is a way of speaking from behind the mask. At times calling it a 'minstrel mask', Baker writes:

[The] mask is a space of habitation not only for repressed spirits of sexuality [...] and a mirror stage of development, but also for that deep-seated denial of the indisputable humanity of the inhabitants of and descendants from the continent of Africa.<sup>161</sup>

Harriett speaks from behind such a 'minstrel mask' when she sings the blues, unifying her African American audience while encoding class and race issues.

The one blues lyric Harriett sings in Chicago tightens the novel's submerged leftist message. Her first appearance on the stage is described in the language of literary primitivism: 'Harriett entered in a dress of glowing orange, flame-like against the ebony of her skin, barbaric, yet beautiful as a jungle princess' (213). The lyric she sings, though, makes Annjee cry, for it reminds her of Jimboy's joining the army:

Red Sun, red sun, why don't you rise today?

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<sup>158</sup> Bigsby writes: 'The autobiography [...] was an experience which had apparently only been processed once; it had been filtered through the sensibility but not yet through the imagination [...] the black autobiography becomes a handbook on life, a testament to the fact that not only can the individual function amidst the chaos of events, he can prevail over them'. C. W. E. Bigsby, *The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature* (London: Greenwood Press, 1980), 182-206 (pp. 182-3).

<sup>159</sup> See Tracy, *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, 85-118 (p. 96).

<sup>160</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 49-52 (p. 50).

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Red sun, O sun, why don't you rise today?

Ma heart is breakin'—ma baby's gone away. (214)

This stanza expresses the emotional suffering experienced when a father deserts his family, and the repetition of the word 'red' is a sign for radicalism. A number of leftist poets who were Hughes' contemporaries from the 1930s (for example, Richard Wright, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Albert Young) used the word 'red' in their poems' titles, respectively in 'I Am a Red Slogan', 'Red Front', and 'The Red Dawn', to stand for 'radical change'.<sup>162</sup> In her introduction to the anthology *Writing Red*, Paula Rabinowitz argues: 'for a woman to write "red", she needed to focus her attention on sex and gender as well as on class and race'.<sup>163</sup> The colour red thus figuratively carries radical meanings, and Hughes' tendency to locate the politics of female agency within his novel implicitly requires us to consider Harriett's use of the word 'red' accordingly. Gates, in examining African Americans' rhetoric, argues that signifying 'is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning [...] an "encoded" intention to say one thing but to mean quite another'.<sup>164</sup> Hurston, who formed the Niggeratti movement with Hughes,<sup>165</sup> uses the African American language of signification to conceal political meanings.<sup>166</sup> In her 1937 proletarian novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston uses the word 'tree' to symbolise her protagonist, Janie Crawford's, 'desire'.<sup>167</sup> The word 'Red', which Harriett repeats twice in two lines, also signifies concealed meanings. It suggests

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<sup>162</sup> Cary Nelson, 'Poetry Chorus: Dialogic Politics in 1930s Poetry', in *Radical Revisions*, 29-59 (pp. 54-5).

<sup>163</sup> Rabinowitz, 'Writing Red: Women's Short Fiction of the 1930s', in *Writing Red*, 19-29 (p. 25).

<sup>164</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44-88 (p. 82).

<sup>165</sup> Hurston adhered to the aestheticism yet not to the politics of the Harlem Renaissance. See Coles and Zandy, eds., in *American Working-Class Literature*, 367-581 (p. 515).

<sup>166</sup> In her play 'Polk Country Blues' collected in *Mules and Men: A Comedy of Negro Life* (1935), Hurston portrays a female protagonist who carries her name and some of her attitudes. Zora the character, once observing a dancing event that she is not a part of, declares a masked political view: 'I went outside to join the woofers, since I seemed to have no standing among the dancers [...] I stood there awkwardly, knowing that the too-ready laughter and aimless talk was a window-dressing for my benefit. The broth in black puts a laugh in every vacant place in his mind. His laugh has a hundred meanings. It may mean amusement, anger, grief, bewilderment, chagrin, curiosity, simple pleasure or any other of the known or undefined emotions'. See Hurston, 'Polk Country Blues', in *American Working-Class Literature*, 467-581 (p. 517).

<sup>167</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 183-226 (p. 191).

Harriett's emphasis, although covertly, on addressing political ideas relevant to the African American proletariat and, therefore, on evoking radicalism. Therefore, in this lyric, Harriett teases out, although from behind a primitive mask and through the repetition of the word 'red', her revolutionary attitudes and those of the novel.

Harriett's style of blues singing reflects her real attitudes, which are connected to those of her African American audience. When Sandy notices 'a certain harshness' in her voice, resulting from both smoking and drinking, Harriett explains that a blues singer is "supposed to sing deep and hoarse" (215). Harriett trains her voice to attract her audience, achieve her popularity, and therefore indirectly address African American issues. Steven Tracy, discussing how Harriett adopts a stage name in Chicago, argues that, like Smith and Rainey, and through 'intelligence, hard work, racial awareness and pride [...] Harrietta has "built herself up" and is now able to provide for future generations'.<sup>168</sup> Like Smith, the 'Empress of the Blues' (whose talent Hughes admired and whose blues singing he refers to in *The Big Sea*),<sup>169</sup> and Rainey, 'Mother of the Blues' (who both danced to and sang 'the blues so feelingly'),<sup>170</sup> Harriett becomes, as Hughes entitles the novel's last chapter, a 'Princess of the Blues' (212). To use phrases describing Smith's way of singing, it is Harriett's unique voice, which is 'both powerful and poignant', which allows her 'to hold an audience spellbound' and to achieve her popularity.<sup>171</sup>

Harriett, further, attracts her audience by the breadth of her lyrics' topics by choosing to sing about African American proletarian issues in particular. LeRoi Jones explains the

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<sup>168</sup> Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, pp. 121-2.

<sup>169</sup> In 1967, further, Hughes directly acknowledged Smith's enrichment of African American culture: '[b]ehind jazz is always the blues. And the greatest of blues singers, Bessie Smith, became a top-drawer attraction—but only among Negroes and Negro theatres'. Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the African American in the Performing Arts* (New Jersey: Prentice-hall, 1967), p. 80.

<sup>170</sup> See Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, p. 93; 99, 119.

<sup>171</sup> Barlow, 'Bessie Smith', 1074-8 (p. 1075).

significance of blues lyrics in general, arguing that the music emerges ‘from the needs of a group’.<sup>172</sup> Paul Oliver further contends:

Essentially the blues singer is a realist and his statements are accurate portrayals of his state of mind, uninhibited in their self-expression. Singing of his condition brings relief to his heart and order to his disturbed thoughts.<sup>173</sup>

Smith and Rainey, Harriett’s models, sing for this relief purpose. A key example is their singing of lyrics about ‘love and sexuality’ in which they challenged the norm that the woman’s place should be in the home.<sup>174</sup> Smith’s and Rainey’s blues lyrics often appealed to their audiences to liberate African American women from marriage, demanding motherhood, and exploitative work in the domestic sphere.<sup>175</sup> Harriett, however, when singing her song in Chicago exhibits neither the ‘intense sexuality’ nor the ‘expressivity’ that Smith and Rainey displayed when they sang,<sup>176</sup> or the primitiveness she sings about in Stanton. Instead, she manages to highlight proletarian issues that touched African American lives without directly addressing the possibility of changing this position. Her song ends this way:

It’s a mighty blue mornin’ when yo’ daddy leaves yo’ bed.  
I says a blue, blue mornin’ when yo’ daddy leaves yo’ bed—  
’Cause if you lose yo’ man, you’d just as well be dead! (214)

The stanza literally describes social difficulties during a period in which African American women were expected to accept assigned positions at work and in families and to act based

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<sup>172</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 81-94 (p. 82).

<sup>173</sup> Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues*, 67-95 (pp. 80-1).

<sup>174</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 3-22 (p. 11). Valerie Prince, in discussing the implied meanings from Ellison’s representation of ‘home’ in *Invisible Man*, notes that ‘Mask wearing is inseparable from the African American historical experience; no amount of shame or anger can erase the past. African Americans have been forced to contort their sorrow into laughter, anger into a grin’. Valerie Sweeney Prince, *Burnin’ Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 40-63 (p. 52).

<sup>175</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 120-137 (pp. 120-1).

<sup>176</sup> Daphne Dual Harrison, ‘Blues and Jazz’, in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by Darlene Hine and others (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 1 (p. 144). See Barlow, ‘Bessie Smith’, p. 1074.

on societally built stereotypes.<sup>177</sup> However, the stanza figuratively wants women to reject this subordination to social and societal confines. By indirectly singing about men and women's societal struggles, Harriett carries social awareness which her historical counterparts feminise and explicitly express.

The fact that Hughes places Harriett in Chicago is significant, largely because blues lyrics sung in big cities differ from the country ones. Jones clarifies:

Classic blues was entertainment and country blues, folklore. The blues and blues-oriented jazz of the new city dwellers were harder, crueller, and perhaps even more stoical and hopeless than the earlier forms. It took its life from the rawness and poverty of the grim adventure of "big city living".<sup>178</sup>

In 'Poor Man's Blues' (1928), as an example, Smith demonstrates her political empathy with the poor when she explicitly pleads the rich to help working-class people.<sup>179</sup> Her song reads:

Mister Rich Man, Rich Man, Open up your heart and mind  
Give the poor man a chance, Help stop these hard, hard times  
[...]  
Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today  
He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.  
Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you.<sup>180</sup>

In Hughes' novel, Harriett never sings explicitly about political issues, but she does make political statements in speech. For example, she says to Annjee, regarding the First World War, "This white folks' war for democracy ain't so hot, nohow!" (215). Indirectly, however, without using words like 'white folks', 'war', or 'democracy' in the song she performs in

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<sup>177</sup> Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women's History 1865 to the Present* (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1986), 59-88 (p. 72).

<sup>178</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 95-121 (p. 105).

<sup>179</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 91-119 (p. 96).

<sup>180</sup> Bessie Smith, 'Poor Man's Blues', in *The American Past: A Survey of American History*, vol. 2, *Since 1865*, ed. by Joseph R. Conlin, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (Australia: Thomson Wadsworth, 2009), p. 650-B.

Chicago Harriett acknowledges the oppression that the African American proletariat experiences, and therefore, her singing is a poignant masking of political resistance.

The close of Harriett's song in Chicago about a man's departure from his family to find work provides an example of this masking. In this song's last stanza, quoted previously, Harriett twice repeats the word 'blue' in one line: 'I says a blue, blue mornin' when yo' daddy leaves yo' bed' (214). This repetition suggests that sadness, indicated in the first mentioning of the word 'blue', can evolve into another response: anger or action. There is, of course, a discrepancy between what is literally said and figuratively meant in blues songs in general. As James Scott maintains, '[a] possibly seditious folk song can be performed in hundreds of ways: from the apparently innocuous before hostile audiences to the openly seditious before a friendly and secure audience'.<sup>181</sup> Rebelliousness is disguised in blues songs, yet it can be aroused by hearing words which have double meanings. In his article which criticises African American intellectuals who chose not to portray their people, Hughes acknowledges the empowering and sometimes hidden messages of blues songs, and particularly their importance for African American artists: 'Let [...] the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand'.<sup>182</sup> To Hughes here, as in his novel, blues songs are masked political weapons, and, notably, Harriett uses this weapon as professional artist in her 'blue mornin'' stanza.

Harriett here functions like a *signifier*, a term used in the study *Black Language* to describe the speaker who artistically manipulates the addressee through playing with words. 'To Signify', Malachi Andrews and Paul T. Owens write,

is to tease, to provoke into anger. The *signifier* creates a myth about someone and tells him a *third* person started it. The *signified* person is aroused and seeks that person [...]

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<sup>181</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 136-182 (p. 162).

<sup>182</sup> 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', 31-6 (p. 36).

Signifying is completely successful when the *signifier* convinces the chump he is working on, that what he is saying is true and that it gets him angered to wrath.<sup>183</sup>

The use of the signifier is particularly evident in African American folklore, suggesting that it is a part of African American culture. One example is in the narrative of the ‘Signifying Monkey’ wherein a monkey, as Gates explains, teases other animals through wordplay.<sup>184</sup> By her song’s close, Harriett plays with the phrase ‘blue mornin’; thus, she functions like a ‘signifying’ character,<sup>185</sup> and veils her rejection of social impositions. Roger D. Abrahams, examining African American folklore narratives, like that of the ‘Signifying Monkey’, maintains that signifying

certainly refers to the trickster’s ability to talk with great innuendo, to crap, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation.<sup>186</sup>

Gates elaborates on this argument by noting that the ‘Monkey’ who masters the technique of manipulation becomes the ‘technique’ itself, the ‘style, or the literariness of literary language’.<sup>187</sup> ‘[O]ne’, Gates proposes, ‘does not signify something; rather, one signifies in *some way*’.<sup>188</sup> In an African American rhetorical mode of expression, like in blues songs, what is expressed is presented in a specific artistic manner, and through her singing, Harriett artistically encodes African American proletarian issues.

The manner in which Harriett sings ultimately unifies and subtly prompts her audience’s semi-revolutionary sentiments. Once her song ‘Red Sun /[...]/ It’s a mighty blue mornin’’, which is about African American fathers deserting their families, comes to close, her audience ‘yelled and clapped and whistled for more, stamping their feet and turning to

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<sup>183</sup> qtd., in Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44-88 (p. 70).

<sup>184</sup> *The Signifying Monkey*, 44-88 (p. 70).

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>186</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1970), pp. 51-2.

<sup>187</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44-88 (p. 54).

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

one another with shouted comments of enjoyment' (214). Harriett here evokes and unifies her audience's reactions. This creates an equivalence with the aims of the proletarian literary movement that writers on the left, including Mike Gold and Hughes himself, pursued. In 'Proletarian Realism', published a year before *Not Without Laughter*, Gold argues that the proletariat class will 'like its predecessors, create its own culture'.<sup>189</sup> Hughes attempts, similarly to his New Negro contemporaries such as Sterling Brown, to 'forge and [revitalize] literature that reflected the spirit and genius of Afro-American culture'.<sup>190</sup> Harriett's becoming a professional blues singer at a theatre named after Booker T. Washington symbolises, as David Chinitz points out, 'a cultural continuity extending, through Washington, from the folk roots of the blues into the Jazz Age'.<sup>191</sup> Her blues singing, further, functions as the novel's mask to resist social inequalities, and this fact becomes clear in particular when Sandy discovers from an African American proletarian magazine that his aunt has become a prominent performer.

In a copy of the *Chicago Defender* weekly magazine, for which Hughes would later write about proletarian and racial concerns during the 1940s and 1950s,<sup>192</sup> Sandy finds a headline announcing his aunt's fame as a blues singer alongside a wide range of African American topics. The narrator describes,

Across the front in big red letters there was a headline: *Negro Boy Lynched*. There was also an account of a race riot in a Northern industrial city [...] but as he was about to turn the page, a little article in the bottom corner made him pause and put the paper down on the counter.

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<sup>189</sup> Gold, 'Proletarian Realism', in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. by Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 203-8 (p. 205).

<sup>190</sup> Tracy, *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, 85-118 (p. 96).

<sup>191</sup> Chinitz, David E., *Which Sin to Bear? Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 145-178 (p. 161).

<sup>192</sup> See *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942-62*, ed. by Christopher C. De Santis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).



## ACTRESS MAKES HIT

St. Louis, Mo., Aug. 3: Harrietta Williams, sensational young blues-singer, has been packing the Booker Washington Theatre to the doors here this week. (183-4)

Two headlines, placed respectively at the top and bottom of the page, are the most noticeable: *Negro Boy Lynched* and ACTRESS MAKES HIT. This typographic variation, which John Dos Passos uses frequently in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), prompts the reader to question the meaning of making these two headlines the most visually attractive lines on the page. Stacy I. Morgan discusses African American social realists' use of modernistic devices in mid-twentieth-century writings, and maintains that experimental techniques intensify political messages. Morgan writes,

Newsreels and similar prose collage devices also seem to have appealed to social realist authors as a way of resolving a crucial formal dilemma: namely, how to adhere to the often politically limited point of view of protagonists while simultaneously interjecting indications of the larger social forces that shape these characters' lives.<sup>193</sup>

Hughes' choice to place the negative newspaper headline first and the positive one last seems to suggest that Harriett's performance is an escape from social injustices. Years later, in a *Chicago Defender* article called 'The Sad, Happy Music Called Jazz' (1959), Hughes maintains that 'As the years went on, the blues came into being with their mighty music of despair and laughter, of trouble and determination to laugh in spite of troubles: "when you see me laughing, I'm laughing to keep from crying"'.<sup>194</sup> Becoming this culture's representative, as Harriet does in Chicago, is *Not Without Laughter*'s figurative solution to the lynching of an African American which is reported in the first headline.

The lynching of male African Americans was prevalent in the first decades of the

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<sup>193</sup> Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Arts and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), 239-301 (p. 251).

<sup>194</sup> Hughes, 'The Sad, Happy Music Called Jazz', in *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942-62*, ed. by Christopher C. De Santis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 216-18 (p. 216).

twentieth century,<sup>195</sup> and Hughes' one-act play *Scottsboro, Limited*, published in *New Masses* in 1931, demonstrates a leftist revolt against such an injustice. More specifically, the play rejects the execution sentence of nine African American boys accused of raping two white women on a train in Scottsboro, Alabama. Its last scene reads:

BOYS:

All together, black and white, Up from the darkness into the light.

ALL:

Rise, workers, and fight!

AUDIENCE:

Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! (*Here the internationale may be sung and the red flag raised above the heads of the black and white workers together*).<sup>196</sup>

The play, ending with lines which depict the singing of unifying lyrics and the raising of the red flag as signs of radicalism, calls for unity between reds and workers, regardless of their colour. Unity is a focal point the Communist Party tried to achieve in the early 1930s and which Hughes embraces here. James Miller, like Barbara Foley before him, proposes that African American intellectuals of the 1930s, similar to their predecessors in the 1920s, found communism to be a way to reveal radical and African American consciousness.<sup>197</sup> Miller argues that writers like Claude McKay 'actively interrogated every ideology available to them in their attacks on the rigid restrictions of life in Jim Crow America: anarchism, socialism, communism [...] revolutionary violence, and emigration'.<sup>198</sup> By drifting toward the left, these writers find 'a complexity and breadth – but also an ambiguity – that corresponded to their own problematic sense of the political position of U.S. Blacks'.<sup>199</sup> Hughes also found

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<sup>195</sup> See Howard, ed., *Black Communists Speak on Scottsboro*; Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*.

<sup>196</sup> Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited*, 116-129 (pp. 128-9).

<sup>197</sup> Miller, 'African American Writing of the 1930s: A Prologue', 78-90 (p. 88).

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 88

<sup>199</sup> Foley, 'Race and Class in Radical African American Fiction of the Depression Years', *Nature, Society and Thought* 3 (1990), 305-324 (p. 305).

in left politics, as shown in *Scottsboro, Limited*, a vehicle to speak out against the lynching of falsely convicted victims.

Like Dos Passos, who assumed that the Communist Party was effective in fighting against the execution of the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti – an assumption that had shifted by the time he wrote *The Big Money*, as discussed in Chapter Three – Hughes wants justice for the Scottsboro boys through a leftist revolt. During the early 1930s, African Americans with leftist political agency wrote or spoke against the execution of these boys and encouraged revolts in protest.<sup>200</sup> The Communist Party also clearly rejected this lynching in 1931.<sup>201</sup> Although he was not a Communist Party member, Hughes was the ‘honorary president’ of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR), which was led by Barry D. Amis, an African American radical and a notable member in the Communist Party in the 1930s.<sup>202</sup> Hughes’ desire to appeal to a potentially rebellious crowd through literature is also evident in *Not Without Laughter* through Harriett’s performance on the Chicago stage. The novel covertly addresses lynching through Harriett’s blues singing while African American boys are sentenced to death in Alabama. Harriett, whose popularity is announced on the *Chicago Defender*’s page where the news about the lynching appears in ‘big red letters’, figures a resistance (183). Even though her songs conceal this issue, she intends, like Hughes’ attitudes towards social injustice, indirect resistance.

In ‘Away from Harlem’, co-editor of *New Masses* and Communist writer Walt Carmon proposes that *Not Without Laughter* has gone far beyond the Harlem Renaissance through showing the African American proletarian struggle. Although the novel has ‘no clear

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<sup>200</sup> See Howard, ed., *Black Communists Speak on Scottsboro*.

<sup>201</sup> The Communist Party’s Central Committee states: ‘Workers, black and white—organize monster mass meetings, militant demonstrations! Let the Southern ruling class know that we will tolerate their crimes against our class and the persecuted Negro race no longer! The death penalty for lynchers! Stop the legal lynching at Scottsboro’. B. D. Amis, ‘They Shall Not Die’, in *Black Communists Speak on Scottsboro*, 28-56 (p. 30).

<sup>202</sup> See Howard, ed., *B. D. Amis, African American Radical: A Short Anthology of Writings and Speeches* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), p. xii.

class consciousness nor revolutionary spirit which distinguished some of Hughes' early poems', Carmon argues, the novel has 'under its black skin, red proletarian blood running through it'.<sup>203</sup> The novel's 'red blood' symbolises Hughes' hidden radicalism, which is significant when viewing Hughes' novel as a proletarian work published in the second phase of the Harlem Renaissance. In this movement's first phase, African American artists tended to formulate their identities by writing about African American dignity to attain 'more justice' for their people.<sup>204</sup> As James Smethurst contends, African American writers with leftist leaning in the 1930s (like Hughes) continued to construct their identity in association with the 1920s New Negro movement by using the vernacular. However, they also distinguished themselves from their predecessors by addressing proletarian concerns.<sup>205</sup> Hughes, who helped edit *New Masses* and who was deeply concerned with class as well as race issues, ties together African American and working-class struggles in his novel.

In spite of unifying these challenges, Hughes avoids using propaganda, or the agitation of race/class consciousness in words, which New Negro Du Bois and leftist Gold call for in their respective articles, 'Criteria of Negro Art' and 'Go Left, Young Writers!'.<sup>206</sup> Actually, Hughes' white sponsor, Charlotte Mason, encouraged him to exclude it.<sup>207</sup> In accordance with Mason's suggestion, Hughes omitted specific dialogues (for example, a bookish male student's speech about the hard conditions in the South that makes Sandy consider being a teacher there).<sup>208</sup> Hughes further, to meet Mason's suggestions, omitted an indirectly propagandist speech Harriett gives at the novel's close telling Sandy to help poor

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<sup>203</sup> qtd., in Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 209-276 (p. 274).

<sup>204</sup> Brown, *Negro Poetry*, 49-83 (p. 60). See Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 29-50 (p. 33).

<sup>205</sup> Smethurst, *New Red Negro*, 16-59 (p. 29)

<sup>206</sup> Gold, 'Go Left, Young Writers!', pp. 382-3; Du Bois, 'Criteria of Negro Art', 100-105 (p. 103).

<sup>207</sup> See John P. Shields, "'Never Cross the Divide': Reconstructing Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*", *African American Review*, 28.4 (1994), pp. 601-613.

<sup>208</sup> Shields, "'Never Cross the Divide'", 601-613 (p. 611).

African Americans,<sup>209</sup> but he keeps Harriett's encouragement of Sandy's education. Robin Kelley writes on aspects of masculine propaganda in 1920-1930s African American political poems, and notes that '[t]he language of masculinity, in fact, dominated representations of grass-roots organizing and Party propaganda, especially during the 1930s'.<sup>210</sup> Hughes' novel mostly avoids this sort of language to bring to the fore women like Harriett.

On one level, Hughes' willingness to alter his text on Mason's suggestions indicates a denial of the opportunity to present a female character as a political agent or, to use Foley's word, a 'mentor' who triggers other characters' class awareness.<sup>211</sup> On a deeper level, though, this alteration releases Harriett from teaching political intentions through propaganda; instead, she becomes a motivational model for Sandy's social consciousness. By the novel's close, Sandy reminds himself: "Not like my father [...] I'm more like Harriett—not wanting to be a servant at the mercies of white people for ever" (210). Harriett insists that Sandy should become 'a great man', an intellectual, exactly as Hager wanted (116). Further, she encourages him to learn ways other than singing to help his people, telling him, "You've got to get your education" (216). Scenes like this one exemplify Harriett's indirect political intentions.

The desire for African Americans to be educated was common in the period of the "Great Migration", particularly in Chicago, where African Americans encountered 'racial discrimination' while seeking work,<sup>212</sup> and where parents therefore often encouraged their children to continue their studies instead of working.<sup>213</sup> In Hughes' novel, without Harriett's

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<sup>209</sup> The scene reads: 'The people who come to hear me sing, Sandy, those are the people you've got to help, dirty, ragged workers for little of nothings in the big cities [...] My dark people, they're the ones that need help, Sandy' (qtd., in Shields, "'Never Cross the Divide'", p. 612).

<sup>210</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 103-121 (p. 114).

<sup>211</sup> See Foley, *Radical Representations*, 284-320 (p. 306).

<sup>212</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 11-52 (p. 34).

<sup>213</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 246-258 (p. 246).

motivation and her model of success, Sandy might not have rejected working-class servitude and decided to pursue his education in Chicago. Encouraged by Harriett, Sandy quits his job in Chicago as an elevator boy. Hughes' knowledge of bad working conditions for African Americans is evident in his earlier works, as well. Notably, in 1926 Hughes wrote a poem called 'Elevator Boy' for *Fire!!*, and the text describes a working boy who prefigures Sandy:

I got a job now  
Runnin' an elevator  
[...]  
Job ain't good though.  
No money around.  
[...]  
Guess I'll quit now.<sup>214</sup>

These lines indicate a hatred of oppressive jobs through submerged protesting. The name of the magazine, *Fire!!*, in which this poem first appeared, intensifies the poem's meaning:

*Fire!!*, like the Harlem Renaissance, blended a somewhat militant and avowedly independent, bohemian outlook which emphasized freedom of expression and the quest for black identity with a more moderate attempt at literary success and middle-class respectability.<sup>215</sup>

Hughes acknowledged that the magazine was 'to be called *Fire*—the idea being that it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-White ideas of the past, *epater le bourgeois* into a realization of the past existence of the younger Negro writers and artists'.<sup>216</sup> Hughes' poem for *Fire!!* ends with the persona quitting an exploitative job,<sup>217</sup> as Sandy does in *Not Without Laughter*. Harriett, who eventually realises the significance of education, assures

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<sup>214</sup> Hughes, 'Elevator Boy', in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems, 1921-1940*, p. 88-89.

<sup>215</sup> Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 64-86 (p. 82).

<sup>216</sup> Hughes, 'Harlem Literati in the Twenties', in *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Cary D. Wintz (New York: Routledge, 1996), 393-94 (p. 393).

<sup>217</sup> 'Elevator Boy', in *The Collected Works*, p. 89.

Sandy that she and her boyfriend, Bill, “can always make the dough—and you go to school” (217). Chicago, as it is for Harriett, becomes a ‘Promised Land’ for Sandy,<sup>218</sup> where he can indirectly, under the mask of education, help African American proletarians.

Harriett’s funding of Sandy’s education from her singing enables this goal. Initially, she gives Sandy a ten-dollar bill for his books (217). The payment is commemorative of Hager’s last moment of figuratively tying Sandy’s future to Harriett’s when she returned the pawned watch to Harriet in Sandy’s presence. Harriett’s dreams for Sandy are expressed clearly in her most influential speech in the novel in which she tells Annjee, who wants Sandy to pursue his work instead of his education, that Sandy has to hold onto his African American identity:

“This boy’s gotta get ahead—all of us niggers are too far back in this white man’s country to let any brains go to waste! Don’t you realize that? [...] He’s gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be—able to help the black race, Annjee! You hear me? Help the whole race!” (217)

Sandy’s prompt response to this speech is, “I want to” (217), and thus Harriett succeeds in inspiring Sandy to help “the whole race” without getting involved in politics. Hughes himself, who was never officially a Communist Party member,<sup>219</sup> tries to solve the struggles raised in the novel without speaking directly politically. However, his leftist white contemporaries did. Gold, for example, was vocal about political involvement. In the same year as *Not Without Laughter*’s publication, Gold proclaimed his belief in the possibility of improving the working class’ position through African American art. ‘I believe that Negro art and literature’, writes Gold in *New Masses*, ‘are only beginning. This cabaret obsession is but

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<sup>218</sup> I quote this phrase from the title of Nicholas Lemann’s historical narrative *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America*.

<sup>219</sup> Denying his alignment with the Communist Party, as his biographer reports, Hughes was a John Reed Club member in the early 1930s. Through this membership the author was able to ‘show solidarity with leftist collectivist action while simultaneously demonstrating his independence from ideological apparatuses’. Gary Edward Holcomb, ‘Langston Unashamed: Radical Mythmaking in Hughes’ 1930s Short Fiction’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 61.3 (2015), 423-445 (p. 428).

an infantile disease, a passing phase. There will be Negro Tolstoys, Gorkys, and Walt Whitmans . . . Negroes are plowing into the revolutionary movement. It is the Negro [sic] only remaining hope'.<sup>220</sup> William J. Maxwell contends that some Harlem Renaissance writers found a way to express their voices through addressing proletarian issues.<sup>221</sup> In *Not Without Laughter*, Harriett carries Hughes' allegiance to implicit social protest through her funding of Sandy's education so that he can intellectually address social struggles.

Chicago becomes the setting for the continuation of Sandy's intellectual journey, and the city for Sandy ultimately becomes, like Stanton, 'beautiful', especially when he hears the singing of its 'old folks' (218). In comparing the city to Stanton, and in paying attention to its old folks' singing after deciding to leave his job as an elevator boy, Sandy connects his contemporary struggles to those of his ancestors. These struggles he aims to transform by carrying on his education in Chicago. However, in the early twentieth century, Harlem, rather than Chicago, was seen as embodying African Americans' characteristics, including 'movement, color, gayty, singing, dancing, boisterous laughter and loud talk'.<sup>222</sup> It is notable, then, that Chicago in *Not Without Laughter* becomes symbolic of African American advancement. Leaving Harlem notably absent from enabling Sandy's and Harriett's dreams suggests that Hughes seeks to represent the African American proletariat regardless of where its people are located in America. Sandy becomes Hughes' representative of proletariat writing. Eventually deciding to model both Washington and Du Bois, Sandy, reflecting experiences from Hughes' life, is expected to combine in his future writing the mastery of form (indirectly addressing African American issues, as Washington did) with its

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<sup>220</sup> qtd., in Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 209-276 (p. 272); See Gold, 'Notes of the Month', *New Masses* 5 (1930), p. 3.

<sup>221</sup> In *New Negro, Old Left*, William J. Maxwell maintains, 'Working-class Harlem internationalists impressed by both the Russian Revolution and a local pro-Soviet left forged links between African American writing and the Old Left while angling to jump-start Harlem's rebirth'. William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia Press, 1999), 1-12 (p. 6).

<sup>222</sup> James Weldon Johnson, 'Harlem: The Culture Capital', in *The New Negro*, ed. by Alain Locke (Atheneum: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 301-311 (p. 309).



deformation (including African American songs of revolutionary themes, as Du Bois did). Sandy thus, as the novel's last scene indicates, is expected to write just as Hughes did in *Not Without Laughter*, with its lyrical-narrative structure and concealed revolutionary themes.

Harriett, whose songs enrich *Not Without Laughter*'s modernist structure, masks the novel's radical politics. Her dancing and blues singing, which reflect her pride in her social background, make her comparable to famous entertainers. Different from the 'primitives' who are literally portrayed in the novel's early folk lyrics and in other Harlem Renaissance texts, Harriett uses her works to encode revolutionary attitudes. In addition, her choice to fund Sandy's education establishes a path for Sandy to resist social subordination by being an intellectual. Her characterisation supports both the novel's form and its subject matter. While Harriett and the characters in *Not Without Laughter* are fictional creations, or fictionalised version of people from Hughes' own life, Hughes addresses them as real people in his autobiographical *The Big Sea*:

Listen, Aunt Hager! Listen, Harriett! Listen, Annjee! [...] I wanted to make you as wonderful as you really are— but it takes a lot of skill in words. And I don't know how.<sup>223</sup>

While Hughes does not overtly politicise his characters, and while Harriett does not obviously attain a political goal by singing the blues, the desire to encode a political message drives Hughes' narrative and, within it, Harriett's blues singing.

Through the use of verse-prose structure and indirectly political content, Hughes deepens his representations of proletariat women by providing them with masked methods of countering social inequalities. The novel's lyrics apparently portray stereotyped African American women, yet figuratively women's presentations are relevant to an implicit rebellious message that counteracts so-called societal expectations of women and the African

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<sup>223</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, pp. 305-6.

American proletariat. The novel's prose, which traces Sandy's development into an intellectual like Hughes, dismantles derogatory stereotypes, like those literally presented in the novel's songs, and represents an array of African American working-class women. This gives credence to Joyce A. Joyce's observation that Hughes' representation of women in his verse and prose writings is not simply stereotypical, for the novelist portrays women's necessity in the family and in society in spite of gendered expectations. With the use of combined genres, *Not Without Laughter*, as previous critics have noted, reflected social themes. It also indirectly intensifies political messages and engages women in this process.

Cultural material relevant to the novel's form and content is useful for investigating the representation of women in Hughes' novel. Published early in the 1930s' cycle of proletarian novels and in the Harlem Renaissance's second phase, the novel serves as a masked proletarian text as well as a modernist work – as both a 'speaking' and 'singing' book, to use Baker's respective descriptions of Washington's *Up from Slavery* and Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>224</sup> Maxwell maintains that white communist intellectuals, like Gold in particular, embraced the Harlem movement's 'affective relations' to the working class and its effectiveness in solving American struggles.<sup>225</sup> In *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes, who engaged himself with revolutionary and modernists politics other than the New Negro Renaissance, suggests non-confrontational means to solve African American proletarian issues. This chapter contends that *Not Without Laughter* represents African American proletariat women who, excluding the protagonist's mother, disparately encode methods of rebellion. Although Hager, Tempy, and Harriett could conform to stereotypes of African American women – respectively to 'mammies', 'amazons', and 'primitives' – instead, they mask protests against societal limitations. Along with Annjee, who resists being a stereotypical 'matriarch', they stimulate, albeit differently, Sandy's awareness regarding the

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<sup>224</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 58; 68.

<sup>225</sup> Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*, 1-12 (p. 7).

necessity of becoming an intellectual like both Washington and Du Bois. Whether or not Hughes' women actually awaken proletarian political activism, the novel indicates that a young man's intellectual maturation for the sake of the betterment of the African American proletariat is shaped by women's encoded political intentions.

## CHAPTER II

### **Limits and Possibilities of Female Agency in Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited***

Stereotypes about proletariat African American women emerge on the surface of *Not Without Laughter*'s blues lyrics. The novel's third-person narrative explores these images, as Langston Hughes surpasses the 'New Negro' call to represent African Americans' dignity and his white patron's suggestion that he writes in a primitivist manner. Jack Conroy, an Irish American novelist, who formed friendships with experimentalist-proletarian writers like Hughes similarly includes folk and popular songs that represent one-dimensional women in *The Disinherited* (1933), which portrays poverty and lack of employment. However, the novel's story, which traces in episodic sketches from Missouri and Detroit the various characters who influence protagonist narrator Larry Donovan's ultimate alliance with proletarian militant activism, complicates these one-dimensional representations by showing a range of possibilities for women's agency.

Notably, numerous historical American and Irish American women – like the social activists Mary Harris Jones (known as Mother Jones), Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Meridel Le Sueur, and Mary Heaton Vorse, to name a few – joined strike activities and became members of the Communist Party in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> As women working in a male-dominated society, which was influenced by narrow ideals, they often adhered to the proletarian culture's masculinist maxims (like seeing Abraham Lincoln as a symbol of the potential of politics to alleviate proletarian struggles)<sup>2</sup> and conformed to domestic roles

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary Harris Jones, *Autobiography of Mother Jones*, ed. by Mary Field Parton (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004); Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, ed., *Words on Fire: The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987); Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (Oxford: OUP, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See Coiner, *Better Red*, 108-140 (p. 130).

(getting married and becoming mothers).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, they involved themselves with political actions in addition to these domestic roles.<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, Conroy and other left-leaning male and female intellectuals (for example, Le Sueur, Vorse, Hughes, Mike Gold, John Dos Passos, Albert Halper, and James Farrell) invoke some of these patterns during the Third Period by reiterating, disrupting, or responding to societal views about women in their representations of proletarian struggle.<sup>5</sup>

As well as the immediate effects of poverty and unemployment, the stock market crash in 1929 produced a range of cultural reactions,<sup>6</sup> including the revival of forms of masculinist politics from earlier decades. As some examples, the image of Lincoln as a self-made man and the American dream ideal, which encouraged individuals to find better life conditions for themselves,<sup>7</sup> were invoked.<sup>8</sup> Communist supporters from the early 1930s, like Gold who edited *New Masses*, however, regarded these beliefs as insufficient for collective proletarian actions.<sup>9</sup> Instead, they internalised Marxist revolutionary ideas that migrant German socialists brought to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attempted to ‘Americanize’ them by applying them to American contexts,<sup>10</sup> and saw militant

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<sup>3</sup> See William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (London: Oxford UP, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 3-50 (p. 32).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Le Sueur, a strike’s marcher in 1934, whose short story ‘They Follow Us Girls’ appeared a year later in *The Anvil*, portrays a working-class female narrator who refuses to work as a whore and who, rather, maintains a chaste friendship with an old man of proletarian attitudes.

<sup>6</sup> See Levine, ‘The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences’, *The American Historical Review* 97. 5 (1992), pp. 1369-99. In this article, Levine suggests that 1930s American popular culture, manifested in radio programs, movies, photographs, and popular songs, was a means to ‘reconstruct people’s attitudes, values, and reactions’ (p. 1372).

<sup>7</sup> In an epilogue to the non-fictional historical narrative *The Epic of America*, published two years before *The Disinherited*, James Truslow Adams, the first to use the term ‘American dream’, suggests that believing in the American dream and working together towards achieving it, as Lincoln attempted, can be a solution to confront the social difficulties encountered in America. See James Truslow Adams, ‘Epilogue’, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931), 401-17 (p. 411).

<sup>8</sup> Jones, ‘The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era’, 710-724 (p. 714).

<sup>9</sup> See Don Edward Fehrenbacher, *The Changing Image of Lincoln in American Historiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 17; Edgar Lee Masters, *Lincoln: The Man* (London: Cassell and Company, 1931), 111-59 (p. 127).

<sup>10</sup> The term “third period” by itself was used widely by Trotskyists who opposed Stalin’s views of finding socialism within the same country without receiving international influence. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and

activity as a means of combatting class issues.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in *The Disinherited*, Conroy problematises progressive American politics and suggests that men's militant actions are the answer to proletarian struggles. Integrating songs with sketches which are delivered through a working-class man's first-person narrative, the novel reflects multi-voiced proletarian narrative and, crucially, includes women's appearances, voices, and sometimes political influences. This chapter argues that *The Disinherited*, through its lyrical-episodic form and complex political standpoint, constructs and deconstructs stereotypes and masculinist expectations about women and it explores the limits and possibilities of women's political activity.

Section one of this chapter maintains that the novel's songs, a popular mode of societal expression, deepen stereotypes (of passive lovers, destructive wives, and self-sacrificing mothers) built about women in general and Irish American women in particular. Larry, the novel's storyteller, and who conveys these songs, initially chases his 'American dream',<sup>12</sup> the individualistic idea of success, and refers to numerous women without always realising their connection to the proletariat's resistance against its struggles. As examined in section two, single women (Wilma and Helen) with whom Larry once had sex and married women (Jessie and Lena) to whom Larry briefly refers deviate from Larry's and from society's sexist expectations of women, which the novel's songs convey. Multiple sketches depict Larry's mother, often referred to in the narrative simply as Mother, and his friend Bonny Fern, as embodying political characteristics. Mother's and Bonny's speeches or appearances help Larry eventually realise the falsity of his American dream, and they spur his cooperation with radical men to save the proletariat from poverty and unemployment. Despite

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Dan Georgakas, eds., 'Often-cited Acronyms, Terms, Movements and People', *Encyclopaedia of the American Left*, p. xx.

<sup>11</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 423-462 (p. 425).

<sup>12</sup> Historian James Truslow Adams is the first to use this term in his *The Epic of America*, which appeared two years before the publication of Conroy's novel.

treating Larry as a surrogate for their own political ambitions, Mother and Bonny are neither stereotyped nor reductively presented as is the case for some other women in the novel. Section three argues that the sentimentalised image built about working-class mothers in particular which appears in the novel's songs is challenged throughout the novel's sketches that feature Mother. The section maintains that Mother, who works as a maid and encourages Larry to study and work and ultimately to fight with revolutionary men instead of keeping him under her control, differs from stereotyped Irish American mothers of the period and, rather, displays political intentions like those of Mother Jones. Bonny, examined in the chapter's final section, also deviates from female stereotypes. She has not confined her life to waiting for Larry's marriage proposal, as the lovers in the novel's integrated songs do. Rather, as an educated woman who later helps with the family farm, she adds a layer of complexity to the novel's political content and experimental form through her lyrical-narrative speeches which reflect what she reads and, accordingly, stimulate Larry's transformation into a revolutionary.

To examine these levels of representations, the chapter utilises cultural details relevant to the novel's content and form. It refers to the work of cultural historians, including Lawrence W. Levine and Morris Dickstein, regarding popular culture in 1930s America; to stereotypes built about Irish American women and women in general;<sup>13</sup> to the working-class agency of notable leftist Irish American women (like Mother Jones); and to experimental proletarian writings from 1930s America. The chapter also employs Bakhtin's concepts about multi-voiced novels, including heteroglossia – the 'dialogism' within a narrative – polyphony, and *skaz* – the literary device of telling a story through the use of first-person narrative, vernacular language, and episodic structure, wherein characters express their views without placing them under the control of the author's or narrator's third-person

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<sup>13</sup> See April Schultz, 'The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget: Domestic Service and the Representation of Race, 1830–1930', *Éire-Ireland* 48. 3-4 (2013), 176-212.

omniscience.<sup>14</sup> These details run differently throughout the chapter's four sections due to the novel's lyrical-narrative form and its divergent proletarian content.

Literary historians Douglas Wixson, Jessica Berman, and Jennifer Marie Harrison maintain in separate studies that *The Disinherited*'s construction spurs the reader to think about unsaid political messages, and, similarly, this chapter argues that the novel's multi-levelled structure produces multiple images of women and their involvement in proletarian concerns. Wixson, the author of the biography *Worker-Writer in America*, contends that Conroy's 'narrative style' in *The Disinherited* carries the narrator's voice which represents other workers' voices.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Wixson argues that 'the montage quality of *The Disinherited* creates an openness in the narrative that contrasts with the closed, ideologically driven world of Socialist realism'.<sup>16</sup> This openness, which is dialogic, in Bakhtinian terms, encourages the solving of proletarian problems through relating the presented scenes to the represented characters. Conroy maintained in a 1982 introduction to the novel that his purpose in writing was to show the proletariat's real struggles, and acknowledged that another key goal from writing this novel was 'to move people to think about these things, and, what was more important, to do something about it'.<sup>17</sup>

Berman contends in *Modernist Commitments* that Conroy's text 'is a compendium of voices and tales, knit together as a series of sketches, and it insists on polyvocality, the vernacular, folkways, and diversity of perspective'.<sup>18</sup> This polyvocality, which is akin to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, intensifies the novel's radical content. Berman writes that Conroy's inclusion of workers' struggles through this use of the *skaz* makes the novel not

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<sup>14</sup> David Lodge, 'Teenage Skaz', *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 17-20 (p. 18). See Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 237-80 (p. 242).

<sup>15</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 46-70 (p. 60).

<sup>16</sup> Wixson, 'Introduction', *The Disinherited: A Novel of the 1930s* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 1-24 (p. 23).

<sup>17</sup> Jack Conroy, 'Introduction', *The Disinherited: A Novel of the 1930s*, 25-31 (p. 28).

<sup>18</sup> Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 237-80 (pp. 255-6).



only proletarian, but also ‘modernist’.<sup>19</sup> *The Disinherited*, through integrating songs and episodic sketches, presents workers’ struggles from different angles, thus bringing attention to various working-class problems. Harrison maintains in her PhD thesis that oppositional narratives which reveal the struggles of marginalised people in ‘embedded tales’, like those in *The Disinherited*, ‘have the potential to undermine stereotypical aspersions by offering readers access to the experiential worlds of the marginalized’.<sup>20</sup> The present chapter takes these arguments further by examining the novel’s women in relation to associated cultural contexts. The discussion starts by investigating stereotyped women in the novel’s lyrics.

### **Women in the Novel’s Songs: Masculinist Representations**

A number of American songs from the 1930s indicated the political, economic, and societal changes that occurred as a result of the 1929 stock market crash, which by its role influenced men’s and women’s ways of living and their attitudes towards one another.<sup>21</sup> For example, a 1931 song, titled ‘I’m an Unemployed Sweetheart’, illustrates this connection between personal and political issues:

I want a job in the moonlight,  
Under the stars above,  
For I’m an unemployed sweetheart  
Looking for somebody to love.<sup>22</sup>

There is a struggle to find both work and love in this song, and in his novel Conroy includes songs that comment on similar issues. His leftist contemporaries, like Granville Hicks and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Marie Harrison, ‘Oppositional Narratives: Embedded Tales, Social Justice, and the Reader’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Maryland, 2013) p. 7. Interestingly, this PhD thesis is directed by Jessica Berman, whose *Modernist Commitments* regards the *skaz* episodic structure in *Disinherited* as a modernist feature.

<sup>21</sup> See Diane Holloway and Bob Cheney, *American History in Song: Lyrics from 1900 to 1945* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2001), 276-286 (p. 280).

<sup>22</sup> ‘I’m an Unemployed Sweetheart’, lyrics by Edgar Leslie and Ned Washington, in *American History in Song: Lyrics from 1900 to 1945*, eds. by Diane Holloway and Bob Cheney (New York: iUniverse, 2001), p. 292. <ebook>.

James Farrell, and more recent critics, like Erling Larsen, argue that the novel's value lies in its topicality rather than its style of writing. Hicks, for instance, writing for the *Partisan Review* in 1934, the magazine whose editors a few years later, in 1936, sought to promote the use of experimental structures in proletarian writings,<sup>23</sup> praises the novel's proletarian content.<sup>24</sup> Larsen, in a contribution to David Madden's *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, further argues that *The Disinherited* 'is essentially an artless book. It is, quite simply, the story of a young man's life'.<sup>25</sup> While its prose follows a young working-class man, like Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, the novel's songs, which are artistic forms of expression and which are recited by either male or female characters, contextualise the economic crash's outcomes. Wixson maintains that 'For most of his life Conroy collected ballads, mawkish verse, and bawdy songs, which he valued for both their humor and their social commentary'.<sup>26</sup> 'Throughout history', Levine contends in an article about popular culture in 1930s America's industrial societies, 'slaves or peasants or workers turned to their lore – their proverbs, tales, songs, religious practices, and jokes – to say things they could not say under the normal rules of discourse'.<sup>27</sup> The songs Conroy includes in his novel have a connection to the poverty and unemployment which Larry addresses in the narrative, but the songs also tend to reduce women to stereotyped images. Seven of the novel's 27 songs present masculinist attitudes about women, casting them as passive lovers, destructive wives, and self-sacrificing mothers. These images were common in the decade's songs. Hughes, for instance, as examined in the previous chapter, exhibits on the surface of the lyrics he creates

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<sup>23</sup> This magazine was launched by the Communist Party in 1934 and merged two years later to *The Anvil*, to be called *Anvil* and *Partisan Review*, the title which was reversed, until it becomes *Partisan Review*. See Conroy, 'Introduction', in *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology*, eds. by Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson (New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1973), ix-xi (p. xviii). See Harvey Teres, 'Remaking Marxist Criticism: Partisan Review's Eliotic Leftism, 1934-1936', in *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889-1939*, eds. by Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 65-84 (p. 67).

<sup>24</sup> See Wixson, 'Introduction', *The Disinherited*, 1-24 (p. 3).

<sup>25</sup> Erling Larsen, 'Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* or, The Way it Was', in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, ed. by David Madden (London: Southern Illinois UP, 1968), 85-95 (p. 94).

<sup>26</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 23-45 (p. 37).

<sup>27</sup> Levine, 'The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences', 1369-99 (p. 1393).

in *Not Without Laughter* women with superficial characteristics. Similarly, the current section discusses the one-dimensional women in *The Disinherited*'s songs.

To help his mother with the family's expenses, Larry, after his father's death in an accident in the Monkey Nest Camp mine, begins to work on the railroad. Nevertheless, later, seeking a more decent life, he chooses to travel for Detroit wherein he does not get a lasting job, and eventually becomes a revolutionary. In his narration about his departure from the Monkey Nest Camp Larry includes his mother's recitation of a song in which a female lover waits for a marriage proposal. Apparently referring to Larry and Bonny, the song states:

Bobby Shafto's gone to sea,  
Silver buckles on his knee;  
He'll come back and marry me,  
Bonny Bobby Shafto. (97)

The fulfilment of marriage, here, requires finding a decent job opportunity which is unlikely to happen in the novel's context. From 1929 to 1932, the years of the Depression with the highest poverty and unemployment, marriage rates declined by about 12 percent.<sup>28</sup> The reason for this dramatic decline, as historians emphasise, 'was simple: people without money, people without jobs, and people worried about losing jobs did not want to make a commitment to family life'.<sup>29</sup> Conroy's novel addresses this issue and Bonny, as examined later in this chapter, comes to accept it, especially when she discerns the necessity of Larry's commitment to the proletariat rather than to her. Larry's uncle-in-law, Rollie Weems, tells Larry that marriage is a limitation to gaining better life opportunities, arguing, "A single man has got a chance. When I was single nobody never 'boo't' me but I'd up and blow the job" (126). The suggestion presented here is that single men have fewer commitments and so are

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew J. Hill, 'Love in the Time of the Depression: The Effect of Economic Conditions on Marriage in the Great Depression', *The Journal of Economic History* 75.1(2015), 163-189 (p. 183).

<sup>29</sup> Lindop and Goldstein, *America in the 1930s*, pp. 66-7.

willing to stand up against injustice, even at the risk of temporary loss of employment. Because job loss was a possibility, men avoided committing themselves to marriage and to supporting a family. Therefore, female lovers, like the one in the song Mother recites, are left waiting like stereotyped lovers for their beloveds' marriage proposals.

A song sung by Rollie, who advises Larry not to get married and who himself travels to France to join the First World War troops a few days after his marriage to Larry's aunt Jessie, suggests that wives destroy their husbands' futures. Rollie sings:

When I was single, O then, O then,  
When I was single, O then,  
When I was single, my money did jingle;  
I wish I was single again, again,  
And I wish I was single again. (126)

In *Not Without Laughter* Hughes' Jimboy sings 'O, yo' windin' an' yo' grindin'', which celebrates deserting women as sexually liberating for men (*NWL*, 34). Rollie, who eventually participates in radical activism after leaving his wife, manifests another misogynistic attitude: wives waste their husbands' money and, henceforth, they might thwart their men's alignment with political activism and with practicing authority over the family. Feminist historian Rosalind Rosenberg explains that in the early 1930s, '[t]o allow a wife to work would mean that a man had relinquished his last hold on patriarchal authority, his very claim to manhood'.<sup>30</sup> This attitude towards wives' work helps to explain the reasons behind Rollie's discouragement of marriage in the above song although Jessie neither works nor interrupts his revolutionary plans. His song encapsulates one of the decade's prevailing masculine ideas, like the belief that working women were seen to undermine their unemployed

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<sup>30</sup> During the first years of the depression, the wife's work was seen as threatening her husband's manhood, since the breadwinning role was societally assigned to men rather than women. As a result, to limit the numbers of working women, the Congress, in 1932, decided to prohibit the work of more than one person in the same family. Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1992), 102-137 (p. 103).

husbands' authority, wherein men were advised not to commit themselves to marriage because wives might limit their opportunities.

Other songs characterise working-class mothers as self-sacrificing women who prepare their children for the future in spite of social difficulties. These mothers are often sentimentalised, to use the terminology of literary historian Richard Hoggart who looks at working-class mothers' ways of living in Northern England: 'She is then the pivot of the home [...] holds it together [...] She leaves the outer world of politics'.<sup>31</sup> Two songs in Conroy's novel portrays mothers in this way. Larry conveys a 'Mother' song, which is sung by a minor character giving 'a sermon on "Mother"':

Take me back to the scenes of my chi-i-i-ldh-o-o-d,  
When I'd whistle and pla-a-y  
Round the old home each da-a-y  
And Mothah—Gawd bless her— was ne-e-ear. (152)

The idea of the mother's emotional support frequently appears in Irish American songs. William H. Williams traces the stereotypical representations that the Irish in America presented yet tried to challenge in their popular songs between the 1820s and 1920s, and argues that Irish American songs continued to portray mothers as the backbones of their families. Williams explains,

[T]he image of mother played an important role in Irish American culture. Irish working-class fathers often died early, leaving the mother [...] 'as the children's only link to the happier days of the past and the symbol of the family's will to survive . . . The widow woman thereby became a classic figure in the Irish community'.<sup>32</sup>

The 'Mother' song, displayed in Conroy's novel, presents the mother also as her son's escape from life's hard conditions. The image presented in the song is of a mother who devotes her

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), 27-62 (p. 38).

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream*, 211-236 (p. 217).

life to her children once her partner is absent, and this image is left unchallenged in the novel's other song about mothers. A subsequent song to 'Mother' states 'Dear mother, dear mother,/Your true love is dead./He sent you a letter/To hold up your head' (170). This message, presumably from a son or husband, tells the woman to be strong, and therefore it is an attempt to hold her up, thus stereotyping her, for she becomes her family's support during her man's absence.

Mothers were presented in poems, as well, and female poets interrogate the stereotypes like those presented in *The Disinherited's* songs. In the poem 'Breed, Women, Breed' (1929), for example, anarchist Lucia Trent criticises the fact that the task of breeding children was often imposed on working-class women:

Breed, little mothers

With the tired backs and the tired hands

Breed for the owners of mills and the owners of mines! Breed a race of danger haunted men,

[...]

Breed, breed, breed!<sup>33</sup>

This breeding, which facilitates society's exploitation of mothers and their children by imposing tiring roles upon both of them, was a key issue for women on the left such as Trent and Ella May Wiggins.<sup>34</sup> Marxist ideas were being absorbed by those on the left in America at this time, and the feminist Mary O'Brien criticised Marxism for the relationship it creates between economic productivity and labourers' work, arguing that this association denies

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<sup>33</sup> qtd in., Caroline Waldron Merithew, "'We Were Not Ladies': Gender, Class, and a Women's Auxiliary's Battle for Mining Unionism", *Journal of Women's History* 18.2 (2006), 63-94 (p. 81).

<sup>34</sup> For further details about other female radicals who fuse personal and political issues in their 1930s poems, consult Julia Lisella, 'Modernism, Maternity and the Radical Woman Poet', in *Womanhood in Anglophone Literary Culture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Perspectives*, ed. by Robin Hammerman (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 184- 209.

mothers' contributions to productivity.<sup>35</sup> Novelists like Hughes and Conroy, who contributed to *New Masses*, which prioritised the adoption of Marxist revolutionary ideas and the stimulation of the fight against capitalism,<sup>36</sup> were certainly familiar with Marxist concerns and with how mothers were societally associated with breeding duties. In Conroy's novel, the mother in the song 'Dear mother, dear mother' encounters exploitative experiences, dedicating her life during her husband's absence to her son's future. She is similar to the African American mother in *Not Without Laughter's* lyrics, 'Thro yo' arms around me, baby,/ Like de circle round de sun!' (33). The maternal images here, in parallel to what Trent's 'Breed, Women, Breed' seeks to free working mothers from, confine working-class mothers' role into making dependents of their children once their husbands are dead or absent.

The inclusion of songs about mothers and other women create a layered narrative in Conroy's novel. Harrison maintains that Conroy's inclusion of multiple voices in 'sketches', such as the embedded tales, popular songs, and recited poems, 'disrupts stereotypical views of the poor'.<sup>37</sup> In her wider study, Berman writes that 'the episodic and multivoiced quality of *The Disinherited* links Conroy not only with this community of workers but also to the modernisms of Harlem Renaissance writers like Zora Neale Hurston'.<sup>38</sup> Conroy uses some experimentation in his novel as Hughes, Hurston's 'Niggeratti' colleague,<sup>39</sup> does in *Not Without Laughter*. Through its songs and prose, Hughes' novel offers depictions of an array of proletarian African American women. Similarly, *The Disinherited's* scattered songs present images of stereotyped women: single women wait for marriage proposals; in

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<sup>35</sup> Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 19- 64 (pp. 42-45).

<sup>36</sup> See Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, p. 189; 198; Tadie, 'The Masses Speak', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, pp. 832-56.

<sup>37</sup> Harrison, 'Oppositional Narratives', p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 237-80 (p. 255). Also, see Anita Patterson, *Race, American literature, and Transnational Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), pp. 93-130.

<sup>39</sup> See A. B. Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003), pp. 25-47.

marriage, they destroy their partners; as mothers they devote themselves to raising their children. Mostly commenting on poverty and lack of employment in the early twentieth century, Conroy's representation of women in the songs is brief and aligns with societally constructed images, which the novel's surrounding prose explores and complicates.

### **The Confrontation of Masculinist Expectations in Brief Episodes from the Novel**

Douglas Wixson maintains that Midwestern proletarian novelists like Conroy were experimentalists, 'but their experiments consisted of adapting and transforming nonliterary, collective sources drawing upon orality, popular culture, folklore, and personal narrative'.<sup>40</sup> James Farrell, by contrast, argues in his 1933 review of *The Disinherited* that 'As a novel, it is superficial. He has described a number of things. He has created almost nothing'.<sup>41</sup> Farrell, a proletarian novelist and critic, here associates narrative description with lack of creativity. In 'Describe or Narrate?', the literary theorist Georg Lukacs differentiates between novelists' describing and narrating, and clarifies that the former is associated with 'observation', the latter with participating in the experience.<sup>42</sup> Lukacs suggests that 'the descriptive method results in compositional monotony, while narration not only permits but even promotes infinite variety in composition'.<sup>43</sup> Further, Bakhtin's 1934 essay, 'Discourse in the Novel', examines narration in modern novels. He writes:

Behind the narrator's story we read a second story, the author's story; he is the one who tells us how the narrator tells stories, and also tells us about the narrator himself. We acutely sense two levels at each moment in the story; one, the level of the narrator, a belief system filled with his objects, meanings and emotional expressions, and the other,

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<sup>40</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 159-184 (p. 179).

<sup>41</sup> qtd., in Larsen, 'Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* or, *The Way it Was*', 85-95 (p. 89).

<sup>42</sup> See Georg Lukacs, 'Describe or Narrate?', in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merline Press, 1970), 110-148 (p. 111).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.



the level of the author, who speaks (albeit in a refracted way) by means of this story and through this story.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to other experimental proletarian works, such as Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932-5), which integrates newspaper headlines with the third-person narrative, Conroy's novel narrates multiple episodes and presents characters using a first-person narrative. Through this style of narration, numerous women challenge Larry's assumptions by deviating from his and other men's sexist expectations, and this weakens the stereotypes displayed in the novel's songs.

Over the course of the novel, Larry briefly encounters a number of women who, while never directly advancing Larry's class awareness, do encode working-class agency. Two are single women with whom Larry has sex in Missouri, and two are married to men who travel with Larry to Detroit. Either single (like Wilma and Helen) or married (like Jessie and Lena), these women show female agency by confronting Larry's and other men's sexist expectations. Barbara Foley argues that proletarian literature generally represents women from sexist angles in order to demonstrate the male protagonists' 'manhood', and *The Disinherited*, more specifically, depicts men who 'free themselves from female entanglements'.<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, Foley suggests that in *The Disinherited*, there is 'a conscious attempt to address women's oppression', and women in this position are 'adjunctive' to male agency.<sup>46</sup> Several women appear in disconnected episodes yet their appearances are relevant to the novel's proletarian themes. This section focuses on the minor women in Conroy's narrative. It argues these women's deviation from the stereotypes presented in the novel's songs and from the masculinist assumptions shown by certain characters. It also examines their reflection of political concerns.

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<sup>44</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422 (p. 314).

<sup>45</sup> Foley, 'Women and the left in the 1930s', *American Literary History* 2.1 (1990), 150-169 (p. 153).

<sup>46</sup> *Radical Representations*, 284-320 (p. 317; p. 318).

Wilma, with whom Larry has his first sexual experience, disrupts but also implicitly propels Larry's class awareness. Immediately after he has slept with Wilma in Missouri, Larry hears a newsboy shouting 'War! *United States Declares War!*', which causes him to turn from her:

“When we gonna get together again, sweetheart?” Wilma's honeyed voice jangled in my ear. I turned on her savagely. She became the embodiment of lust; the synthesis of evil. Women were fighting and dying in the trenches while this shallow girl lay unmoved by the tremendous news. (109)

This juxtaposition, which could be associated with the abusive attitudes to women that Foley sees as a recurrent feature of the novel,<sup>47</sup> leads Larry to contrast his perception of Wilma with instances of female agency in war. 'All the heroic stories of the papers came back to me,' he states, 'The women of Russia fighting in the trenches [...] Joan of Arc appearing to lead the French troops' (108). Joan, the French warrior known as the Maid or Daughter of God, led troops to liberate her country from the Burgundians and the English, and her name by itself, writes historian Marina Warner, places her 'at the centre of a web of imagery associated with the power of women since antiquity. The bow is the weapon of the Amazon [...] it was principally as an Amazon that she was presented'.<sup>48</sup> Introducing the figure to American readers, Mark Twain recounted her bravery and patriotism in *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896).<sup>49</sup> In this novel's conclusion, Twain emphasises: 'With Joan of Arc love of country was more than a sentiment—it was a passion. She was the Genius of Patriotism'.<sup>50</sup> Randall Knoper utilises this quotation to analyse Twain's nationalism, and argues that 'Twain makes Joan of Arc an allegory of national principle that he could apply to his own

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 318.

<sup>48</sup> Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 201-18 (p. 201).

<sup>49</sup> Justin Kaplan writes that Twain both dematerializes and idealises Joan 'beyond all credence'. Justin Kaplan, 'Introduction', in *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), xxxi-xlii (p. xxxii).

<sup>50</sup> Mark Twain, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), p. 461.

landscape'.<sup>51</sup> Conroy, who worked on a biography of Twain before writing *The Disinherited*,<sup>52</sup> also saw the value of applying international politics to American contexts, albeit from a leftist perspective. *The Disinherited* records Joan's heroism when Larry assumes Wilma's superficiality after they have had sex. The mention of Joan, who devoted her life for her country's liberty, in Larry's retelling of him sleeping with Wilma is significant. Because of Wilma, who is neither patriotic nor chaste like Joan, Larry associates the controlling of one's desire with the militant mission of releasing the working class from its submissiveness to the bourgeoisie, a mission that he ultimately undertakes by the novel's close.

Paula Rabinowitz, in a study that primarily focuses on the decade's female-authored revolutionary novels, regards a rape scene in James Farrell's *Judgment Day*, the last volume in the trilogy *Studs Lonigan* (1932-1935), as representing the working class' servility prior to its fighting of social injustices.<sup>53</sup> *The Disinherited* presents consensual intercourse between Larry and Wilma, but this scene also highlights the fact that the working class is servile to the middle class and that Larry needs to act for the former class' release. Proletarian novelists at times portray women's bodies in sex relationships to figure the proletariat's struggles, and Conroy, as an example, establishes this indirect correlation in his next novel, *A World to Win* (1935).<sup>54</sup> The novel, using a third-person narrative, describes mill worker Leo Hurley's political radicalism, which reaches its peak after he witnesses his wife, Anna's, death during her childbirth. Meridel Le Sueur, who writes about working class and women's issues in her short story 'Sequel to Love' (1935), which was published first in Conroy's short-lived

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<sup>51</sup> Randall Knoper, 'Mark Twain and Nation', in *A Companion to Mark Twain*, eds. by Peter Messent and Louis J. Budd (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005), 3-20 (p. 11).

<sup>52</sup> See Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, p. 124.

<sup>53</sup> See Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> Foley acknowledges that in this novel, Conroy 'depicts a male worker coming to class consciousness largely through witnessing his wife's childbirth death in a roadside ditch'. Foley, 'Women and the Left in the 1930s', 150-169 (p. 161).

magazine *The Anvil*,<sup>55</sup> praises this last scene. The ‘real power’ in *A World to Win*, Le Sueur argues, ‘blossoms out’ when Conroy depicts Leo’s and Anna’s tragic lives within a proletarian context.<sup>56</sup> However, she criticises the novel’s descriptive style of writing:

The weakness seems to lie in the use of what I will have to call bourgeois narration, in intellectualization and diffuse description. Instead of the gigantic, emotional, visual, factual life immediately and freshly observed, that distinguished his first book, *The Disinherited*, here we have a removed narration, intervention by the author.<sup>57</sup>

Through *The Disinherited*’s first-person narration, Conroy gives Larry a space to tell about himself as a working-class man and about other characters without authorial control and without ‘diffus[ed] description’. As a result, Wilma, unlike the female narrator in Le Sueur’s 1935 story, appears as a mute figure from Larry’s perspective. This status, however, contrasted with Joan of Arc’s political activity, symbolises the proletariat’s passivity and Larry’s need to fight for its salvation. It prefigures the influence of Anna’s death on Leo’s revolutionary affiliation in *A World to Win*, thus indicating Wilma’s indirect influence on Larry’s radical politics.

More active than Wilma, Helen Baker, the second woman with whom Larry had sex in Missouri, bypasses Larry’s expectations when she works as a lunch girl in Detroit. Larry goes to see Helen while he is drunk and he is told that the city’s Civic Morality League set behaviour standards (like opposing drinking) for the restaurant Helen works in (197).<sup>58</sup> As a

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<sup>55</sup> This story’s narrator rejects the Salvation Army Home’s plan of sterilising her after she had a baby from an unemployed lover who leaves her behind, arguing that her struggles as woman echoes that of a subordinate figure from the working-class. ‘Workers’, argues this female narrator, ‘ain’t supposed to have any pleasure and now they’re takin’ that away because it ain’t supposed to be doin’ anybody any good and they’re afraid I’ll have another baby’. Meridel Le Sueur, ‘Sequel to Love’, in *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology*, eds. by Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson (New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1973), 106-108 (p.106). The limitations practiced over a woman, this story by Le Sueur indicates, echo those that the proletariat suffer in a classist society.

<sup>56</sup> Le Sueur, ‘Join Hand and Brain’, *New Masses* 9 (July 1935), p. 25.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> Jayne Morris-Crowther maintains in her historical study, *The Political Activities of Detroit Clubwomen in the 1920s*, that Detroit, an urban city with a large population during the 1920s, witnessed social crimes resulted from drinking and gambling and that the Political and Civic League aimed to rehabilitate this society’s position.

result, when Larry suggests paying her like a prostitute to go for a walk with him, Helen responds, “Go away! Leave me alone!” (200). This response, which is the opposite of Helen’s prostitution in Missouri, confuses Larry,<sup>59</sup> and Helen here becomes a speaking agent.

Writing about the speeches of fictional characters, Bakhtin theorises:

The language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each character’s speech possesses its own belief system, since each is the speech of another in another’s language; thus it may also refract authorial intentions and consequently may to a certain degree constitute a second language for the author.<sup>60</sup>

Larry, a working-class narrator who at this point in the novel chases the American dream of living a bourgeois life, intends to objectify Helen’s body like he does Wilma’s, an idea that Conroy’s authorial perspective, voiced through Helen’s active resistance, rejects. Sociologist Helen Hacker, examining *The Communist Manifesto*’s allusion to women’s oppression, maintains that ‘Public prostitution, as old as monogamy, was reinforced by the economic power of the bourgeoisie, indirectly, by foisting degrading conditions of life upon proletarian women, and directly, by seducing them’.<sup>61</sup> In Conroy’s novel, Helen resists Larry’s seduction, and thus she represents the proletariat’s rejection of the bourgeoisie’s dominating actions. By gaining a stronger sense of self while working in Detroit, Helen makes Larry succumb to her will, although this clashes with his sexist assumptions about her.

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Clubwomen like Josephine Davis, who was in connection with this Civic League, Morris-Crowther contends, were concerned about the proliferation of crimes and vices in this large city and Davis the protection of young women from the dangers of living in a big city like Detroit. Therefore, a Woman’s Division of the Police Department was created in the early years of 1920s, in order to lower the crimes that young women might encounter in Detroit. In spite of these efforts to rehabilitate the Detroit society from crimes and vices, there was an increase in the numbers of prostitution ‘because there was no well-organized anti-prostitution drive in Detroit’. Jayne Morris-Crowther, *The Political Activities of Detroit Clubwomen in the 1920s: A Challenge and a Promise* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2013), pp. 83-106.

<sup>59</sup> Conroy’s own relationships with women were complicated – he was ‘sexually aware’, yet ‘very shy’. See Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 46-70 (p. 68).

<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, 259-422 (p. 315).

<sup>61</sup> Helen Mayer Hacker, ‘Marx, Weber and Pareto on the Changing Status of Women’, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 12.2 (1953), 149-162 (p. 151).

Larry narrates how Helen rejects his advances, and the main parts of his conversation with her are ‘double-styled’,<sup>62</sup>

“Go away and leave me alone,” she begged, beginning to cry.

“I’ve got money.”

“There’s other girls here.”

“How would you like to have me say you a little poetry, then.

You used to like that. Here’s one by John McClure:

‘I shall steal upon her

Where she sits so white,

Creep-mouse, creep-mouse,

In the twilight.’” (198-9)

The narrative-poetic structure in this episode produces two layers within Larry’s storytelling, thereby encouraging the reader to compare Helen’s vocal character to the silent woman in the poem by McClure that he recites, a comparison which highlights her autonomy. As Douglas Wixson contends, Larry here ‘has difficulty resolving the conflict in his mind between viewing the working-class girl Helen romantically, as a member of the exalted sex to whom he quotes poetry, and seeing her as a purely sexual being who can give him pleasure’.<sup>63</sup> This conflicted response means that Helen is associated neither with the entirely apolitical nor with ‘the domestic’ or ‘the emotional’ which Barbara Foley generally attributed to women in Conroy’s novel.<sup>64</sup> Foley, commenting on the conjunction between class and gender issues in a group of the decade’s proletarian writings, notes that in *The Disinherited* Conroy tries to create awareness of ‘women’s oppression’, but that his represented women ‘remain associated with the domestic, the emotional, the “merely” personal’.<sup>65</sup> While Foley suggests

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<sup>62</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, 259-422 (p. 304).

<sup>63</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 46-70 (p. 58).

<sup>64</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 284-320 (p. 318).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317; p. 318.

Helen as an example, this character functions more actively than the merely silent woman in the poem that Larry recites to her.

The novel's use of a multi-voiced style of narration helps associate women like Helen with the political. More particularly, to borrow Bakhtin's analysis of a quotation from Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* wherein the narrator unfolds certain realities by commenting on a character in colloquial language, the scene where Larry tries to make advances to Helen by reciting poetry exhibits a 'double-styled *hybrid construction*'.<sup>66</sup> This construction helps expose realities about women's issues. On one hand, from Larry's perspective, Helen is a sexual object. On another hand, Helen's brief appearance in this scene, which Larry delivers in a stylistically 'hybrid' form of narration,<sup>67</sup> suggests that Conroy edges towards associating women's struggles with those of the proletariat since Helen does not conform to Larry's sexist expectation about women like her.

Other episodes portray married women as figuratively hiding political tendencies. Jessie, Larry's aunt, who is pregnant with Rollie's child but keeps it a secret, is such a woman. Larry recounts a scene in which he finds a quail protecting herself and her eggs from a barking dog, and Jessie smiles when seeing the bird's reaction:

The collie scared up a quail and it ran limping and fluttering away with the dog barking excitedly after it. Then I knew that the bird's nest was near; and that as soon as the dog had been decoyed far enough away, the quail would rise up and fly back. (68)

The scene symbolically intimates the way Jessie conceals from Larry an action, presumably her pregnancy. This scene does not reveal this secrecy. Rather, later in the novel, Larry makes this point more clearly: Rollie, the reciter of songs discouraging marriage, who aspires to better living conditions and for revolutionary activism, has joined the army in France and left Jessie for seven months after one day of their marriage, and Jessie gives birth 'ahead of

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<sup>66</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', 259-422 (p. 304).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

time' (113). This pregnancy suggests that Jessie hides a working-class responsibility, to utilise Rabinowitz's idea about represented mothers in the decade's female-authored radical novels:

Mothers enable the revolution by embodying change as they swell with child and by creating the first experience of merger for their children, an experience that is later recaptured in the collective solidarity of struggle.<sup>68</sup>

That Jessie's pregnancy has been secret indicates an intended clandestine solidarity with the working class. Jessie, thus, deviates from her husband's misogynistic arguments and the songs he recites about wives being destructive to their partners' plans.

Lena, the first wife of Larry's friend Nat Moore, also disrupts male characters' expectations of married women. When she hears Nat telling Larry that they have no children because of her sterility, Lena argues, "Ain't my fault we ain't got younguns, you little fizzle! If you was a real man?" (146). Lena's vocal agency here, her ability to turn the tables on Nat, contrasts markedly with a similar scene in Albert Halper's *The Foundry*, a 1934 proletarian novel,<sup>69</sup> in which a sterile wife's reaction is passive to her husband Duffy's blaming her for not becoming pregnant. "You've got a big enough belly to foal an army," Duffy declares, "why the hell can't you have a kid?" Mrs Duffy's responses to these words are 'crying' and begging Duffy to stop insulting her (*TF*, 106). Larry mentions that Lena repeatedly talks about the "falling of the womb" (*TD*, 105), and this expression enables Conroy to portray a freer kind of female identity than Halper's novel. This liberty is strengthened by Lena's view on women's adultery, exhibited when she asks Larry outright, "Don't you think a woman's got the same right as a man?" (*TD*, 157). *The Foundry's* narrator makes a similar commentary when a married woman, Mrs Hill, develops an affair with Duffy while her

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<sup>68</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 63-96 (p. 82).

<sup>69</sup> This novel also includes few songs and newspapers headlines, but these elements are not given a large space like the songs in Conroy's novel.



husband is receiving a medical treatment: ‘A woman can’t love two men at the same time, can she?’ (*TF*, 263).<sup>70</sup> Lena’s direct asking in Conroy’s novel about women’s rights in having relationships outside marriage implies her confrontation to Larry’s and her society’s expectations about her as a wife. Hacker, in analysing the connection between women and working-class issues that Marx addresses, maintains that

Modern adultery [...] was in part an expression of women’s rebellion against the exclusive supremacy of men in a patriarchal society, and in part an expression of the bourgeois desire for a community of women, a system of wives in common.<sup>71</sup>

Lena’s speaking about adultery, like Helen’s refusal to give in to Larry’s advances, breaks with conventional expectations of working-class women’s passivity and submission.

These episodes imbue Lena, Helen, Jessie, and Wilma with a degree of agency that makes them more than one-dimensional women, and thus they hint at larger political issues. Although only briefly referred to in the novel, these women, either single or married, confront the sexist assumptions Larry seems to embrace and which are recorded in the novel’s interwoven songs, thus enlarging the novel’s gender politics. Hughes’ novel of similar elements gives agency to Sandy’s female relatives by further including and modifying some autobiographical elements from the author’s own life. Discussing how Conroy wrote his novel, Wixson concludes that ‘Worker narrative and autobiography reflect a variety of aims and interests’.<sup>72</sup> Larry, like Hughes’ third-person narrator, narrates few scenes about women in his life and he limits their qualities to the extent of his knowledge.<sup>73</sup> However, as

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<sup>70</sup> Breaking this norm, however, Mrs Hill shows love to the two men when sending money to her husband for his treatment by receiving financial support from Duffy whom she keeps her friendship.

<sup>71</sup> Hacker, ‘Marx, Weber and Pareto on the Changing Status of Women’, 149-162 (p. 151)

<sup>72</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 325-355 (p. 343)

<sup>73</sup> Sandra Stahl maintains that a worker’s autobiographical narrative ‘always involves some manipulation of the truth of the experience’. According to Wixson, too, when the author narrates a story, he ‘negotiates the conflicting demands of truth and “aesthetically dramatic structure”’. See Sandra Dolby Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), p. 18; Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 325-355 (p. 343).

this section maintains, these women surpass Larry's and society's gendered expectations of them, thus indicating Conroy's own political views about women.

### **Larry's Mother, a Mother with Political Awareness**

Conroy's representation of Larry's mother, called Mother by her son and known as Mrs Donovan in the mining camp where she lives, becomes more political throughout the novel's prose narrative, for she is a brave and kind woman for the proletariat's sake. After the death of her husband, Tom, who was a strike organiser, she works in domestic services, yet she also encourages the furthering of Larry's education by recommending to him to both work and study. In one sketch, she feeds an African American strike-breaker in her house while in another sketch she rejects an offer to work as a cook for strike-breakers despite her need to financially support her orphaned children, including Larry. By the novel's close, she encourages Larry to fight alongside other radicals. Through these evolving actions and her conversations with Larry, Mother stimulates her son's growing political engagement and activism, and thus exhibits her political encouragement of the improvement of the working class' position.

Instead of reducing Mother's features to those of the sentimentalised working-class mothers depicted in two of the novel's interpolated songs – the 'Mother' and the 'Dear mother', both of which portray mothers as supporting their children – Conroy seems to embellish personal or historical experiences to, rather, deepen Mother's character. Literary theorist Kenneth Burke argues in 'Symbolic War' that proletarian writers typically either depict a real historical moment into which imagined characters are inserted, or portray real persons in a fictionalised context.<sup>74</sup> In either case, a symbolic war breaks out between opposing themes or ideas in these writings. Burke refers to *The Disinherited* as an example,

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<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Burke, 'Symbolic War', *The Southern Review* 2 (1936), 134-147 (p. 139).

and states that although the novel presents the roughness of laborers' lives, Conroy arouses readers' sympathy with 'a courageous, hard-working, but victimized mother [...] an incident unrelated to the matters at hand'.<sup>75</sup> Laura Hapke similarly notes that the novel is about Larry's search 'for mentors to fill the void left by [his father] Tom Donovan's mine death'.<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere, Hapke argues that male proletarian novelists like Conroy depict working-class women as 'so apolitical or sluttish that there is little hope for their reformation at anyone's hand'.<sup>77</sup> By contrast, *Mother* displays kindness and commitment to working-class politics. This combination of traits resembles the proletarian activities of Mother Jones, a strike organiser who resisted scabbing (strikebreaking) and treated the proletarians, including African Americans, like her sons, and who therefore functioned as a unifying Mother during early twentieth-century strike actions.<sup>78</sup> While Larry's mother does not enter the political sphere as a strike organiser like Jones, she partly embodies her political attitudes. The current section discusses this portrayal of Mother and her influence on Larry's political development.

Conroy might have run, to borrow Richard Hoggart's term, 'peculiar risks' of sentimentalisation when choosing to portray a working-class mother.<sup>79</sup> His use of the sketch form to include fragmented experiences that respond to the novel's songs, however, helps him manage the risk of simply sentimentalising Mother. In an early sketch, when Mother is recently widowed and the women in her church offer to adopt Larry and his sister, Madge, Mother controls her nerves and argues that she is capable of taking care of her children. Larry

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>76</sup> Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), 217-244 (p. 226).

<sup>77</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 107-142 (p. 142).

<sup>78</sup> Organising the United Mine Workers and participating in strikes during the 1900s, for instance, Jones 'attracted widespread public attention to the strikers' wives by leading them in marches on which they routed strike breakers with brooms and mops'. By organising the miners' wives into brooms and mops' groups, women were encouraged to 'intimidate scabs' to prevent them from entering the mines. See Irving Dilliard, Mary Sue and Dilliard Schusky, 'Mary Harris Jones', in *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, eds. by Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, 3 vols (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1971), vol. 2, p. 287.

<sup>79</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 27-62 (p. 38).

describes the scene:

Mother's face clouded. She nervously laced and unlaced her fingers.

"You folks are mighty kind", she said, "but I don't like to break up my home. I'm going to try to raise the children the best I can. If I can't do it, then I'll have to make other plans". (82)

The argument about the necessity of not breaking up her family is notably a feature of the sentimentalised mother which appears in the novel's song "He sent you a letter/To hold up your head" (170). In another sketch about the same adoption situation, Mother, unlike the maternal figure in the 'Mother' song, proclaims to Larry that he should become 'a man' on whom she relies: "'You've got to be a man now," she said solemnly. "You're the only man I've got left. These people will never offer to help us again.'" (83). By encouraging Larry to help her with the family's finances, Mother differs from mothers who encourage their children's dependence on them, and whose images appear in two of the novel's songs.

In an interview many years after *The Disinherited*'s publication, Conroy said that a friend 'was good enough to say *The Disinherited* is acceptable to feminists because of the portrayal of the mother'.<sup>80</sup> While her characterisation alone is not enough to defend *The Disinherited* as a feminist text, Mother represents a nuanced portrayal of women, especially when seen alongside traditional proletarian mothers. Hoggart, in looking at British proletarian contexts, maintains that the working-class mother is usually honoured: she performs her domestic duties and leaves the public sphere of "the news" to her husband; she knows little about his job'.<sup>81</sup> Different from this sentimentalised image and also from the mother in *The Disinherited* is Conroy's mother, Eliza McCullough. Wixson, who traces Conroy's life as a worker-writer, suggests that in his novel 'Conroy does not leave the impression that Eliza

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<sup>80</sup> Conroy; Thompson, 'An Interview with Jack Conroy', 149-173 (p. 153).

<sup>81</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 41.

was a heroic drudge [...] Gender roles in her marriage were such “Father sat glumly by” while Eliza managed the practical affairs of living’.<sup>82</sup> Mother in *The Disinherited* manages her family’s living affairs like Eliza did, but this happens only after her husband’s death and, further, she transfers this responsibility to Larry. Thus, the heroic features in her character are not entirely feminist.

As it documents, transforms, or fabricates autobiographical memories and experiences *The Disinherited* encourages readers to interpret the novel based on its associated relevant contexts, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue in their work on interpreting autobiographical narratives.<sup>83</sup> *The Disinherited* contextualises poverty and unemployment, which Conroy himself encountered first in Missouri’s Monkey Nest Camp and later in Detroit. As Miriam Allen deFord argues, Conroy writes ‘from the inside to tell outsiders what the inside was like’.<sup>84</sup> In the 1982 introduction to his reprinted *The Disinherited*, the author emphasised that through his novel he wanted ‘to show how it feels to be without work and with no prospect of any, and with the imminent fear of starvation’.<sup>85</sup> Through this narrative recreation, Conroy writes a story about his life with ‘some fictional embellishments’.<sup>86</sup> According to Wixson, working-class writers tend to record their childhood memories and recall their mothers as ‘strong figures on whom fell the main responsibility for holding the family together and managing its economy’.<sup>87</sup> While Conroy’s own mother seemed to fit this description, the fictionalised Mother shares the breadwinning responsibility with Larry after refusing the churchwomen’s offer to adopt her children, thus complicating what might have been a simply sentimentalised character.

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<sup>82</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 23-45 (p. 42).

<sup>83</sup> Smith and Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 21-62 (p. 31).

<sup>84</sup> Miriam Allen deFord, rev, ‘Jack Conroy: *The Disinherited*’, *The Humanist* 24 (1964), p. 28.

<sup>85</sup> Conroy, ‘Introduction’, *The Disinherited*, 25-31 (p. 28).

<sup>86</sup> Wixson, ‘Introduction’, 1-24 (p. 21).

<sup>87</sup> *Worker-Writer*, 23-45 (p. 23).

Mother is not unlike Hager, whom Hughes differentiates from stereotypical ‘mammies’ by hiding her rejection of the hard conditions she encounters while doing low-waged laundry work. Mother quietly accepts her work washing and ironing miners’ and butchers’ clothes. Larry recounts how she works without complaint, like a silent machine:

She bobbed up and down, up and down, as tirelessly and as mechanically as an automaton and a peanut roaster, pausing only long enough to hang out a batch of clothes or to stir those in the boiler with a stick. (84)

Sometimes her eyes were closed as she ironed. Blinding sweat dripped from the tip of her nose and from her chin. (85)

The same image occurs in Tillie Olsen’s short story ‘I Stand Here Ironing’ wherein a daughter sees this work’s endless burden on her mother.<sup>88</sup> Ironing in such proletarian narratives, as Michael Denning argues, ‘signifies relentless, repetitive toil’.<sup>89</sup> By performing this work for pay, Mother in Conroy’s novel is juxtaposed with a stereotype: the ‘Bridget’ from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>90</sup> which suggested that Irish maids in America were bad workers.<sup>91</sup> Social historian April Schultz creates a profound connection between this stereotype and that of the ‘mammy’. ‘Both groups of women’, notes Schultz, ‘entered these jobs at times when their dire poverty and low status coincided with a growing need for domestic help [...] both used their incomes to help their families’.<sup>92</sup> In contrast to the mammy image, constructed about African American maids who were obedient to white masters, though, the Bridget stereotype characterises Irish maids as unmannered.<sup>93</sup> Mother does not reflect the latter dimension. Like Hager, who pursues her work as a washerwoman

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<sup>88</sup> Tillie Olsen, ‘I Stand Here Ironing’, in *Tell Me a Riddle, Requa I, And Other Works* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 5-14 (p. 13).

<sup>89</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 230-258 (p. 245).

<sup>90</sup> See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 133-164 (p. 133).

<sup>91</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, p. 133.

<sup>92</sup> Schultz, ‘The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget: Domestic Service and the Representation of Race, 1830–1930’, 176-212 (p. 181).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

despite racial and classed burdens in order to support her family, Mother tolerates the repetitive toil of domestic service. Even when insulted, she remains silent. Larry once notices that Mother's eyes were 'red' and 'swollen', potentially from crying, after she delivers the butcher's wife's, Mrs Koch's, clothes which Mrs Koch probably regards as poorly laundered (87). The 'red' and 'swollen' eyes, which figuratively stand for the proletariat's fighting, indicates that Mother is not unlike Hager, who conceals radicalism and whose portrayal is more political than that of a stereotyped maid.

Hager reveals her political attitudes through her desire for Sandy to become another Booker T. Washington so that he can address African American proletarian issues without creating hostility with white Americans. Similarly, Mother also sees hope in nineteenth-century political figures and specifically recommends that Larry follow the path of Abraham Lincoln, a self-made man who was seen in the decades after the Civil War and during the Depression, in particular, as a symbol of political change and labour organisation<sup>94</sup> – a myth that many Americans accepted at that time.<sup>95</sup> After Tom's death in the mine, Mother tells Larry, whom she wants to both work and study:

“You can go to the night school and get an education that way,” she said. “Lincoln had only a burning log to study by and not many books, but now his name will never be forgotten”. (105)

Lincoln's name was immortalised and mythologised over several decades due to his call for each American's self-improvement through education<sup>96</sup> and his attempts to find justice for the socially marginalised. And this detail associates Mother with political awareness.

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<sup>94</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 448).

<sup>95</sup> Masters, *Lincoln*, 200-55 (p. 222).

<sup>96</sup> See David S. Reynolds, ed., *Lincoln's Selected Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. ii. To the people of Sangamo County in his first political announcement in 1832, which followed the loss of his seat in the Illinois General Assembly, Lincoln argued that education is 'the most important subject which we as people can be engaged in. That every man may receive at least, a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries' (*Lincoln's Selected Writings*, p. 2).

The historian Alfred Haworth Jones affirms that '[t]he crisis of the 1930s called out for a human symbol, epitomizing the American democratic tradition, to sustain a commitment to free institutions in the face of adversity. Lincoln the Great Emancipator filled the role [...] Symbolizing neither party nor nationality, he stood for freedom and democracy, for unity and charity'.<sup>97</sup> Lincoln also symbolised an individual's ability to achieve better life conditions through the advancement of one's class, and it is this aim that James Truslow Adams embodies in the phrase he coins two years before the publication of Conroy's novel: 'the American dream'.<sup>98</sup> Morris Dickstein maintains that the American dream as a phrase became popular in the 1930s. 'The notion of the self-made man, however', Dickstein writes, 'had originally been a democratic ideal, a dream of social mobility—and even *Kultur*—not simply for a small elite but for the common man', and this idea bolstered the 'mythology' of Lincoln.<sup>99</sup> To use terms from Marina Warner's discussion of Joan of Arc, this myth places Lincoln 'at the centre of a web of imagery'<sup>100</sup> associated with masculinist ideals. In Conroy's novel, Mother encourages Larry to follow Lincoln's model, and this initial political plan for her son, like Hager's plan for Sandy, reflects Mother's ambition for proletarian mobility through improving a working-class man's education.

Lincoln, whom Mother wants Larry to emulate, grew up in poverty but studied and worked as a lawyer to improve his life conditions,<sup>101</sup> and as a result, his name was often invoked as a symbol of American progressivism.<sup>102</sup> Mother Jones is one of the key strikes activists to whom Lincoln remained a symbol of American social progressivism throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. Twice in her 1925 autobiography, Mother Jones refers to Lincoln as the 'immortal' man who influenced her activism against social

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<sup>97</sup> Jones, 'The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era', 710-724 (p. 723).

<sup>98</sup> Adams, *The Epic of America*, 401-17 (p. 411).

<sup>99</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 215-310 (pp. 220-1).

<sup>100</sup> Warner, *Joan of Arc*, 201-18 (p. 201).

<sup>101</sup> Masters, *Lincoln*, 111-59 (p. 127).

<sup>102</sup> See Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 448).



injustice.<sup>103</sup> When she was imprisoned for agitating strikers during the steel strike of 1919, Jones responded to the town officials who came to her cell to suggest that she used her knowledge about influential men for aims other than agitating by saying that she followed the protest and kindness of men like Lincoln.<sup>104</sup> About Lincoln she said, ‘there was a man once who had the gift of a tender heart and he agitated against powerful men, against invested wealth, for the freedom of black men’.<sup>105</sup> Mother Jones seemed to reflect an early twentieth-century widespread belief, which is not explicitly mentioned by the Mother Conroy portrays, about Lincoln as a man to model for bettering American social conditions.

In the early 1930s, however, imbued with radicalism, leftism, and militant fighting, this mythologised image of Lincoln became widely problematised.<sup>106</sup> Edgar Lee Masters, in the 1931 study *Lincoln: The Man*, regards a belief in Lincoln’s heroism as a ‘myth’ that he himself had imbibed, believing that ‘Lincoln was a man of the people springing out of the very soil, autochthonous, and natural, a man of cordial amenities and simple fraternities, and democratic in principle and in practice’.<sup>107</sup> Lincoln scholars from the 1930s, as a pamphlet called *The Changing Image of Lincoln in American Historiography* maintains, also took ‘an anti-Republican direction and therefore anti-Lincolnian direction’, to attempt to revise this overly heroic representation of Lincoln.<sup>108</sup> Constance Coiner, in a more recent study which examines some of Le Sueur’s 1930s writings, contends that Le Sueur challenges the ideals that the male-dominated Communist Party encouraged, like the American dream and the

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<sup>103</sup> Jones, *Autobiography of Mother Jones*, p. 28; p. 37.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>106</sup> In a February 1934 issue of the marines’ militant magazine *Leatherneck*, appeared an essay entitled ‘Abraham Lincoln’ whose author is anonymous. The essay argues that Lincoln does not differ from other men: ‘Lincoln is not a superman, and to attempt by song or oratory to put him on such a pedestal, is to rob his life of much of its charm, and to lessen his influence as an inspiration for us, for it leaves us no hope of reaching the same attainment. Abraham Lincoln does not differ so much from thousands of other men. He realised his possibilities, and so can every man, if he will’. ‘Abraham Lincoln’, *Leatherneck* (pre-1998) 17.2 (Feb 1934), p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> Masters, *Lincoln*, 200-55 (p. 222).

<sup>108</sup> Fehrenbacher, *The Changing Image of Lincoln in American Historiography*, p. 17.

mythification of Lincoln.<sup>109</sup> Certainly, though, the myth of Lincoln become central to the Communist Party, especially after 1935. Dickstein maintains that when the Communist Party shifted its program from radical to progressive cultural politics with the emergence of the Popular Front, ‘Lincoln became the epitome of the common-man hero’.<sup>110</sup> This brand of Progressivism revived past national ideals, such as the American dream, the idea of Lincoln as the common and self-made man, and the Jeffersonian vision of agrarian life. The Popular Front proletarian phase, Dickstein contends, sometimes influenced intellectuals with leftist leanings to transform their faith in revolutions and radicalism into a belief in these ideals, and in this ‘progressive Americanism’.<sup>111</sup> *The Disinherited*, which appeared before 1935, is more politically ambiguous. It ends with Larry’s participating in radical activism, and exposes in an early sketch Mother’s reminding of Larry that Lincoln’s name is unforgettable because of his self-improvement manifested when pursuing his education under poverty.

Larry’s mother is in various ways likened to Mother Jones most obviously sharing her hatred of strike-breaking. While she was organising a 1902 miners’ strike in West Virginia, Mother Jones is reported to have lectured an African American spy, telling him: ‘don’t you know that the immortal Lincoln, a white man, gave you freedom from slavery. Why so you now betray your white brothers who are fighting for industrial freedom?’<sup>112</sup> In a comparable moment, Larry’s mother also preaches to an African American man whom she feeds despite the fact that he has been caught trying to break a strike: ““Oh, you were scabbing!” Mother said accusingly. “You were taking another man’s job. You should expect to get beaten up for

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<sup>109</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 108-140 (p. 130). About Le Sueur’s 1931 prose-poetic short story that explicitly critiques Lincoln, Coiner writes: ‘In “Corn Village” Le Sueur’s first task in demythification is to chip away at the traditional image of Lincoln as the man closely identified with the Illinois plains’ (135). In this story, Le Sueur breaks the myth that Lincoln was man who supported his land: ‘Remember the sadness and innate depression of Lincoln as symbolic. He was naturally a lover, but he never loved the land, though he walked miles over it, slept and lived on it, and buried the bodies of those he loved in it; and yet he was never struck with the poetry and passion that makes a man secure upon his land, there was always instead this convulsion of anxiety, this fear’.

(‘Corn Village’, 12)

<sup>110</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 448).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., xiii-xxiii (p. xxii).

<sup>112</sup> Jones, *Autobiography of Mother Jones*, 35-9 (p. 37).

that” (81). While she earlier does invoke Lincoln, and the idea of an individual rise or a ‘great man’ leader, she does not do so here. Larry’s Mother is associated with a subtly differentiated from the politics of Mother Jones.

*The Disinherited*, appearing in 1933, which was a peak year for radicalism in the Third Period, certainly calls for fighting social injustice through militant activism, and this call is also exhibited in part by Larry’s mother, who discloses her hatred of scabbing and openly contributes to planned strikes. In this way, Mother is further differentiated from stereotypical maids and self-sacrificing mothers. When farmer Fred Dodson, whose house Mother rents, tries to convince her to reconsider accepting the mine owner Edward Stacpoole’s suggestion of cooking for strike breakers, reminding her that cooking is easier and better paying than washing, Mother rejects him on principle. She would rather leave the house than accept this work, and Larry recalls this scene as follows:

“You’d better get somebody else to feed the scabs,” Mother said quietly, but with such finality that he knew it was no use to argue further. He seemed very much disappointed, for our house was the only one of any size within easy reach of the mine. (89)

In Mother Jones’ autobiography, several chapters of which cover the miners’ strikes that she organised from the 1900s to the 1920s, she describes in one chapter called ‘A Human Judge’ her hatred of strike-breaking, which she regards as an act of betrayal.<sup>113</sup> Conroy, whose father was a miners’ strike organiser,<sup>114</sup> also associates scabbing with betrayal in *The Disinherited*. Despite neither joining a strike nor leading any sort of revolutionary action, Mother in the above sketch remains, much like Jones, loyal to the striking miners, for she refuses to serve strike-breakers. Scabbing is, to both Jones and Larry’s mother, a form of betrayal that

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<sup>113</sup> In this chapter, Jones describes how she was jailed after organising a miners’ strike in June of 1902 in Clarksburg, West Virginia. When convinced with reports that her judge in the court was not a scab, Jones proclaimed, ‘I am glad to be tried by so human a judge who resents being called a scab. And who would not want to be one. You probably understand how we working people feel about it’ (*Autobiography of Mother Jones*, p. 28).

<sup>114</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 10-22 (p. 21).

detaches its adherents from collective proletarian agency. Through refusing to support strike-breakers, Mother demonstrates her proletarian commitment.

Mother's alignment with strikers and her feeding of an African American strike-breaker enable her to initiate bridging the distance between Irish and African American proletarians. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Irish American relationships with African Americans were often oppositional. Historian Noel Ignatiev argues that in order to identify themselves with mainstream Americans, for instance, Irish Americans used their whiteness to advance their positions in the workplace and to oppress African Americans.<sup>115</sup> Many decades later, however, during the Harlem Renaissance (which started in the early 1920s and lasted until the 1930s), writers like Du Bois wanted African American writings to urge a unity with radical Irish immigrants.<sup>116</sup> Conroy, who established friendships with African American writers like Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, discouraged racism in his own life and writing. His biographer, Wixson, writes that discrimination against African Americans was sometimes challenged in the Monkey Nest Mine in the 1910s by union organisers like Conroy's father, who recognised that African American issues overlapped with those of the working class.<sup>117</sup> The correlation between these struggles is notable in some of the short stories published in *Anvil*, the magazine that Conroy edited, including Erskine Caldwell's 'Daughter' (1933) and 'Blue Boy' (1935) and Hughes' 'Dr. Brown's Decision' (1935).<sup>118</sup> Conroy's novel, too, grapples with the question of racism in relation to the question of working-class struggles, and it is Mother who draws out this issue by being the first character in *The Disinherited* to challenge racist behaviour.

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<sup>115</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-7 (p. 1).

<sup>116</sup> James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 239-279 (p. 271).

<sup>117</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>118</sup> See *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology*, eds. by Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson (New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1973), pp. 26-34; 78-83.

Mother also stimulates Larry's class consciousness. By the novel's close, she has suffered from poverty which also touched other characters (like Bonny whose father Ben's farm was to be sold in an auction). Shortly after one farmer returns Ben's farm from the auctioneer, though, Mother who never discloses to Larry about her poverty in Missouri while he seeks better life conditions in Detroit, ultimately proclaims to Larry: "I want you to be a fighter like him [Tom]. We've got to have more fighters" (261). These words, to utilise Paula Rabinowitz's idea from the anthology *Writing Red*, are figuratively *red* ones. Bakhtin, explaining the multi-discourses that can be implied from the same novel due to the presence of author's intentions as well as narrator's and characters' voices, postulates:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.<sup>119</sup>

That Mother no longer mentions Lincoln to Larry implies her adoption of more revolutionary attitudes. She aims to make Larry give up his Lincolnian dream of bettering his own position through education to, instead, practice, as his father did, the collective goal of fighting alongside his class. Mother here apparently, to use Constance Coiner's argument about Le Sueur's demystification of Lincoln in the short story 'Corn Village' (1931), 'has not replaced myth with reality. She has replaced the abstract and hollow American myth, like that surrounding Lincoln's life, with "ordinary" Midwesterners' myths and dreams'.<sup>120</sup> Mother widens the scope of these myths by declaring to Larry that he should know who, what, and how 'to fight' (261). The phrase 'to fight' has an immediate influence on Larry encouraging him to join the German Hans in militant activism, like his father Tom did before him, thus affirming the effectiveness of Mother's red words.

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<sup>119</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', 259-422 (p. 293).

<sup>120</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 108-140 (p. 137).

Larry's emerging class consciousness is connected to his rejection of racism. While working his temporary brick-laying job in Detroit, when his African American co-worker Mose faints while working in the sun, Larry, who earlier witnesses Mother's kindness towards the African American scab, insists on bringing a doctor for Mose despite the foreman's initial rejection, saying, "I don't lay another brick till you get a doctor for him" (271). Larry, further, drinks water from Mose's cup although his white partners warn him against doing so. Larry disavows the racism that his white co-workers show towards African Americans, and reaches an epiphany: 'But I could no longer withdraw into my fantastic inner world and despise these men [African Americans]. I did not aspire to be a doctor or a lawyer anymore' (270). Larry here twists the Lincolnian dream, which champions the seeking of one's own success;<sup>121</sup> rather, he decides to champion the downtrodden, regardless of their colour. Larry's thinking of others, including African Americans, instead of considering only his individual plans indicates the influence of Mother's apparently conflicted yet actually socially-conscious actions on him.

Larry develops this working-class responsibility due to interacting with class-conscious characters, a process of 'proletarian conversion' that Barbara Foley identifies in several proletarian novels and autobiographies.<sup>122</sup> Foley points out that while some scenes in *The Disinherited* resemble Conroy's own life experiences, the narrative 'I' refers to Larry rather than Conroy. Foley maintains: '[r]eaders have no reason to separate narrator from author, but neither are they immediately invited to conflate the two'.<sup>123</sup> Wherever there are two voices in a novel's narrative, double meanings emerge: that of the speaker and that of the author. This 'heteroglossia', to use Bakhtin's terminology, 'once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is *another's speech in another's language*, serving

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<sup>121</sup> Masters, *Lincoln*, 111-59 (p. 127).

<sup>122</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 284-320 (p. 296).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way [...] Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized'.<sup>124</sup> In Smith and Watson's view about narrators of autobiographies, Conroy either represents or reduces the multiple sides of personal experiences.<sup>125</sup> In either case, he offers dialogic scenes wherein he tries to take a step back from presenting his own experiences as a worker in order to elevate a working-class mother's political influence on her son. By the novel's close, Hans asks Larry to speak after the return of Ben's farm, and Larry confesses: 'I thought happily that I must have inherited some of my father's gift' (282). While Larry sees his 'gift' – of having both a kind heart and the ability to inspire political activism – as patrilineal, the novel shows that it is also matrilineal and, more broadly, grounded in female as well as male histories of radicalism.

Although Larry's mother embodies this influential 'gift', her radical tendency is limited: she neither leads a strike like her historical counterpart, Mother Jones, nor joins the strike that her son will organise. Although the novel's title implies that Larry is one of the disinherited, intellectually he inherits Mother's aspiration for him to translate proletarian attitudes into actions. In a late episode, Hans argues that Larry is "a chip off the old block", meaning that he follows in Tom's footsteps (282). However, it is Mother, who embodies realistic rather than the superficial and stereotypical characteristics that emerge through different episodes, who helps Larry cling to this inherited quality of kindness and bravery for the sake of developing the proletariat's position. Gold, whose proletarian novel *Jews Without Money* functioned as a model for Conroy, argues in his essay 'Proletarian Realism' (1929) that '[t]he class that will inherit the world will be the proletariat'.<sup>126</sup> Conroy's Larry, like Gold's Mikey, is on his way to fight with radicals and, henceforth, to inherit the land, with the assistance of rounded women like Mother, who projects Larry as a surrogate for her own

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<sup>124</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', 259-422 (p. 324).

<sup>125</sup> Smith and Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 235-86 (p. 236).

<sup>126</sup> Gold, 'Proletarian Realism', 203-8 (p. 205).

political agency and who, because of her political awareness and militant aspirations for Larry, is neither stereotyped nor sentimentalised.

### **Bonny Fern Haskin, a Friend with Controlled Emotions and Proletarian Commitments**

Mother, unlike the sentimentalised mothers presented in the novel's two songs 'Mother' and 'Dear mother', reflects combined traits like those of Mother Jones, and she influences Larry's alignment with the proletariat. Bonny Fern exhibits similar political desires. In the novel's episodes, which present the poverty in Missouri and the lack of employment in Detroit that the proletariat, including Larry, encounters, Bonny forms a chaste friendship with Larry. She also obtains a sociology degree in Detroit and furthers her sociological and political ideas, which she communicates to Larry. Further, she motivates Larry's class-conscious spirit, especially when introducing him to proletarian texts and ultimately encouraging him to fight alongside radicals. Bonny diverges from the normative portrayal of single women as passively waiting for their lovers' marriage proposals, an image which is depicted in the novel's song, 'He'll come back and marry me' (97). Further, she differs from Wilma and Helen, whom Larry regards as objects of his desire. As the novel's sketches move forward, Bonny's political ideas develop and trigger Larry's responsibility towards the working class. This section maintains that Bonny gains a degree of agency by serving as a mentor to Larry, but can find no way in which she herself might take on a public role and be directly involved in the leftist politics of the period.

A number of male-authored proletarian experimental novels published in the Third Period – like Farrell's *Lonigan* trilogy (1932-1935) and the first two volumes of Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* and *1919* – portray women's submission to men's desires, their lack of awareness about working-class struggles, or their absence from the male political sphere. Key critics in the field of proletarian literature have noted this observation or



the female agency yet not in male authored writings. Foley, for instance, argues that 'Proletarian literary works frequently unambiguously showed sexist representations of women and operated from the premise that selfhood was manhood'.<sup>127</sup> In a similar study, Paula Rabinowitz examines the intersection between class and gender issues in 1930s revolutionary female-authored fiction. Rabinowitz argues that leftist women's fiction of the 1930s 'rewrites women into the history of labor and workers into the history of feminism', a re-writing that 'helped to develop a theory of embeddedness of class, gender, and sexuality in our [women's] bodies and our texts'.<sup>128</sup> Constance Coiner also identifies elements of 'feminism' in the writing of Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen.<sup>129</sup> Coiner argues that despite these novelists' commitment to radical politics, their novels and articles for radical magazines like *New Masses* relate to the issues working-class women encounter in a sexist society. The ways in which leftist male and female novelists approach the issue differs, but both of them tend to correlate radical politics and feminist consciousness.

Le Sueur, for instance, in her proletarian novel *The Girl*, written in 1939 but only published later in a revised form in 1977, potentially because of its feminist ideas,<sup>130</sup> reports on women's reactions to being treated like sexual objects. Male-authored proletarian fiction, as Rabinowitz argues, generally does not focus on the labour, the class, or even the desire of working women in the way that books by radical female novelists do.<sup>131</sup> There is a tendency, however, exemplified by Conroy in *A World to Win*, as Foley points out, to break sexist assumptions and relate working-class struggles or 'resistance' to the struggles of women with

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<sup>127</sup> Foley, 'Women and the left in the 1930s', 150-169 (p. 153). Of these novels, Foley argues, are Albert Halper's *The Foundry* (1934) and Edward Newhouse's *You Can't Sleep Here* (1934) wherein women are under men's control, and *The Disinherited* wherein men do not commit themselves to marriage.

<sup>128</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 1-16 (p. 4).

<sup>129</sup> Coiner, 'Literature of Resistance: The Intersection of Feminism and the Communist Left in Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen', in *Radical Revisions*, eds., 144-166 (p. 154).

<sup>130</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 97-136 (p. 99).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-62 (p. 45).

strong ‘selfhood’.<sup>132</sup> Although no scene in *The Disinherited* describes women as sexually objectified in the way that the women characterised in Le Sueur’s novel are, Conroy utilises, much like Le Sueur, the first-person narrative technique. While using this technique in a story that calls for men’s militant working-class agency, Conroy presents Bonny in several scenes wherein his narrator Larry admires her ‘pretty’ and ‘majestic’ appearance even when she lives a middle-class life in the novel’s early sketches (44; 60). Bonny is “a good girl”, Larry once says to his friend Ed, who is more experienced with girls, “Don’t try any rough stuff” (118). This intention to keep Bonny away from his and others’ sexual desires contradicts the widespread sexist worldview displayed in the novel’s song lyrics and by many of its other male characters.

While *The Disinherited* is a mostly male-focused narrative, Conroy integrates Bonny’s voice into the novel’s proletarian male voices. This multi-voiced style of writing closely resembles what Bakhtin calls, in his analysis of Dostoevsky’s fiction, ‘polyphony’: the artistic style of composing a novel with ‘the plurality of consciousness-centers not reduced to a single ideological common denominator’.<sup>133</sup> With this style of composition, Conroy offers, much like Hughes, lyrical-narrative episodes wherein a working-class male narrator introduces a female character’s voice to indicate female agency. Through this voiced integration, Bonny conceals her emotions towards Larry, who delivers her voice to the audience. In an early sketch, she sings a romantic song before poverty touches her family:

There’s just three things in this world I wish for,  
 ’Tis my coffin, grave and shroud.  
 But when I’m dead please come and see me;

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<sup>132</sup> Foley, ‘Women and the left in the 1930s’, 150-169 (p. 161). The male novelists whom Foley also regards as indirectly intersecting gender and working class issues, are: James Bell in *All Brides Are Beautiful* (1936), William Rollins in *The Shadow Before* (1934), and Arnold Armstrong in *Parched Earth* (1934).

<sup>133</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature’, in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 5-46 (p. 17).

Kiss the girl whose heart you broke. (93)

Bonny, who does not sing her song directly to Larry, establishes her emotional stability; her song is not about someone in particular. When overhearing this song, Larry notes that Bonny ‘was wailing in a lugubrious tone [...] I tried to tell myself that she had me in mind’ (93). Bonny, whose voice does not conform to Larry’s one-dimensional premise about single women as seeking affairs, differentiates herself from the song’s persona, whose heart is broken because of a man’s absence. Actually, the fact that Bonny is ‘wailing’ the romantic lines makes her comparable to Harriett in Hughes’ novel. Harriett sings a blues lyric with a similar meaning – “Ma heart is breakin’—ma baby’s gone away” – and makes her sister cry, as the lyric reminds Annjee of Jimboy’s departure to join the army (*NWL*, 214). Bonny’s singing the lyric with a sad tone without crying indicates that she, much like Harriett here, is not the same as the song’s persona, whose heart is broken during the absence of her beloved. Larry’s inclusion of Bonny’s singing of this song, while the song does not address him directly, evokes a distance between Bonny’s character and the narrative of her song, thus affirming Bonny’s deviation from a stereotyped female lover.

Bonny manages her romantic feelings even in her direct conversations with Larry. When her family experiences financial struggles, she admits to Larry more than once that she worries about loneliness more than any other difficulties. When Larry asks her how she finds life back in Missouri after leaving Detroit, she profoundly comments: “It’s been even worse than I thought it would be [...] The loneliness most of all” (243). The Social activist Elizabeth Flynn discloses a similar idea in the 1939 poem ‘South Beach (After 14 Years), 1925-1939’. The poem reflects Flynn’s love for a communist official, Carlo Tresca, and expresses her loneliness during her lover’s absence:

I am alone and being alone my brave!

Gone are the nights of lonely waiting and of tears, of anxious

Worry and a comrade's fears,

To him who did not come, so long ago.<sup>134</sup>

Personal and political concerns are intertwined here, and Conroy's novel embodies 'an imaginative transformation of experience', a feature which R. W. Steadman attributes, while reviewing *The Disinherited*, to 'Literature, proletarian or otherwise'.<sup>135</sup> Conroy is not unlike his contemporary worker-writers, who 'wrote in short breaths, at night after work'.<sup>136</sup> That his narrator, Larry, conveys Bonny's rhetoric about loneliness the author seems to imagine a friendship episode within a proletarian context.

This experiment of portraying Bonny's friendship with Larry might seem, to borrow Kenneth Burke's point when describing *Mother*, irrelevant to the novel's focus on the proletarian struggle.<sup>137</sup> However, this friendship, not unlike Mother's influence on Larry's political development over the novel's climactic sketches (like the increase of her poverty in Missouri), is associated with the novel's politics. Reading Ed's letter sent from Detroit, which reports that Bonny has some fun with working-class friends, Larry first assumes that Bonny 'is getting wild just like the rest' (149). Bonny, however, remains sexually untouched by men including Larry himself, and this lack of sexual activity puts her on a pedestal much like Mother, associating her with traits other than the sexual.

The intellectual dimension of Bonny's character emerges as she pursues her education in Detroit. About her life as a sociology student, Larry, who is chasing with his friends the American dream in Detroit, explains:

Neither Ed nor I saw much of Bonny Fern anymore. She stayed in her room at night and her mother said she was always having to write a theme or something of the kind. For

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<sup>134</sup> Elizabeth Flynn, 'To Carlo, South Beach (After 14 Years), 1925-1939', in *Words on Fire: The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*, ed. by Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987), 146-150 (p. 147).

<sup>135</sup> R. W. Steadman, 'A Critique of Proletarian Literature', *The North American Review* 247.1 (1939), 142-152 (p. 152).

<sup>136</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 185-209 (p. 200).

<sup>137</sup> Burke, 'Symbolic War', p. 141.

me she had never fully emerged as a creature clothed with flesh [...] Ed complained that her college education was giving her the big head. (194)

Having a space to write her thoughts freely, presumably following English feminist Virginia Woolf's recommendation for intellectual women in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Bonny functions as an independently thinking woman. Sociologists Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg contend in their study on how the structure of American patriarchal families changed from 1900 to 1930 that 'advanced education had facilitated greater independence for women'.<sup>138</sup> This period's societal norm was that '[m]en were expected to be providers, women homemakers; husbands made the decisions, women were help-mates'.<sup>139</sup> Women's domesticity, therefore, was reinforced and their 'place in the home seemed to have been strengthened rather than weakened in the years after 1920'.<sup>140</sup> Despite this segregation, women in the early twentieth century, as Mintz and Kellogg emphasise, became less content with their traditional roles as wives who were committed to taking care of their husbands or as mothers who were expected to breed children, especially when they pursued their education.<sup>141</sup> In Conroy's novel, Bonny breaks the norm when studying in Detroit. Although still living in her father's house, she creates a space for herself, especially once distancing her friendships with both Larry and Ed. Much like what Woolf encourages, she unleashes her own thoughts and revolts against women's limited roles, therefore deepening her character through her education.

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<sup>138</sup> Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: A Division of Macmillan, 1988), 107-31 (p. 125).

<sup>139</sup> Chafe, *The American Woman*, 89-111 (p. 97). 'Discrimination' against women between the years 1920-1930s, Chafe maintains, 'was deeply rooted in the structure of society—in the roles women played, and in a sexual division of labor which restricted females primarily to domestic sphere of life' (p. 46). In the workforce, for instance, women were often allocated to the works which men usually rejected; they were treated as a 'marginal worker' and as a consequence they received low payments when compared to their male colleagues (p. 65).

<sup>140</sup> Chafe, *The American Woman*, 89-111 (p. 111).

<sup>141</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 107-31 (pp. 108-9).

The novel refers to moments like the lack of employment in Detroit after the 1929 stock-market crash, and Bonny's notions about how to ease the hard economic conditions that her family encounters in Detroit exemplify the breadth and depth of her sociological reflections. To the consequences of the 1929 economic collapse, she reacts with frustration:

The office where she [Bonny] worked reduced the force, and she was without a job.

After a few days about the house she became peevish and I seldom talked to her.

Sometimes her eyes were red from crying. (214)

Larry's description of Bonny's 'red' eyes echoes Mother's red eyes after the performance of her domestic service, and it signifies intended radicalism against the lack of decent living conditions. Hughes' Harriett encodes a similar message in her song that starts with 'Red Sun, red sun, why don't you rise today?' (NWL, 214). Bonny, who has red eyes from crying because of the loss of her job and that of her father, also carries a masked political tendency manifested by her hope to combat poverty. Once insulted by her father, who regrets paying for her education, Bonny cries, "I'll work it out on the farm [...] I'll milk the cows, hoe corn, cut sprouts. I'll pay you back" (217-8). The performance of this promise reinforces masculinist agrarian ideals which confined women to the roles of helpmates for their farm families.<sup>142</sup> Bonny's acceptance of doing this auxiliary work on her father's farm despite its irrelevance to her degree, nevertheless, also reflects her development into an open-minded sociologist with practical ideas. Further, she, like Harriett, who sings a 'red' song, and Mother, who has 'red' eyes, hides a working-class resistance.

Bonny, when no longer employed in the clerical sphere, which is most relevant to her degree in sociology, expresses to Larry her refined argument about how to endure a proletarian position by listening to the radio. Essentially, she complains to Larry about the

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<sup>142</sup> See Casey, 'Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women's Progressive Fiction', in *The Novel and the American Left*, pp. 96-117.

expected loneliness on her father's farm, and to Larry's suggestion of listening to the radio, she comments:

“That *would* be wonderful! But it takes money to buy a radio, money to keep the batteries charged [...] But how *can* we live without hearing Amos and Andy”. (218-9)

Declaring the necessity of frequently hearing *Amos 'n' Andy*, a comic radio show,<sup>143</sup> manifests Bonny's potential to resist, by escaping through artistic representations of life, the adverse economic conditions that her family encounters. Morris Dickstein, in his study about the 1930s and its means of escapism, argues that the decade's radio programs, literature, photographs, movies, dances and songs played a key role that 'paralleled' the government's support of the poor with the New Deal programs.<sup>144</sup> The radio in particular, which was Roosevelt's way of connecting with Americans, was in the reach of the poor.<sup>145</sup> Dickstein maintains that radio's presence in the lives of almost everyone makes the radio comparable to the New Deal: 'It eased their anxieties and contributed to lifting their spirits; it helped fashion the nation's collective mind'.<sup>146</sup> Conroy himself assumed that workers could find “intellectual relaxation and mental stimulus” in popular-culture ikons like *Amos 'n' Andy*.<sup>147</sup> Bonny shares a similar logic once disclosing to Larry that life would be difficult to many people, including herself, without listening to *Amos 'n' Andy*.

By mentioning *Amos 'n' Andy* in this particular, though, Bonny points to a leftist concern within the 1930s. The concern is the continuity of conditions like poverty in spite of the fact that on the radio Roosevelt explained his New Deal plans for bettering the lives of the

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<sup>143</sup> This radio show offered stereotypical representations of African Americans. It constructed racial stereotypes but also introduced African American Jazz music to American audiences during the 1920s-1930s. See Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 100-123 (pp. 107-8).

<sup>144</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 522-530 (p. 526).

<sup>145</sup> See Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), 9-25.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 3-12 (p. 8).

<sup>147</sup> qtd., in Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 230-255 (p. 252). See Richard Lowenthal, *Social Change and Cultural Crisis* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

common man, farmers, and the poor and unemployed,<sup>148</sup> plans that not all of Roosevelt's audience saw as the answer for proletarian struggles.<sup>149</sup> The audiences of popular cultural modes (radio programs, movies, photographs) in 1930s American industrial urban societies, Lawrence W. Levine contends, 'come to popular culture with a past, with ideas, with values, with expectations, with a sense of how things are and should be', and therefore they are not simply guided by what this culture presents to them.<sup>150</sup> Researchers on radio and its social and psychological impacts on audiences in the 1930s, however, noted: '[w]hat is heard on the air is transitory, as fleeting as time itself, and it therefore seems *real*'.<sup>151</sup> *Amos 'n' Andy*, like other art forms in 1930s, certainly allowed its audience to temporarily forget about their social struggles. Susan J. Douglas, who hints at this pivotal impact in a study on radio's influence on American culture from the 1920s-1950s, maintains that 'Radio comedy was revolutionary and conservative, insubordinate and obedient, attacking conventional authority yet buttressing it at the same time'.<sup>152</sup> Dickstein, arguing that listening to the radio in the 1930s helped its audience escape from their troubles, also explains:

Under the guise of mere entertainment, *Amos 'n' Andy* transposed people's daily problems, especially money problems, into a different key and made them seem more manageable—interminable, perhaps, but manageable.<sup>153</sup>

The audience's reception of this politically masked program, *Amos 'n' Andy*, is similar to the reception of the New Deal programs by the left, who championed the New Deal plans 'not as solutions in themselves but as prefiguration of a future democratic and collective social

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<sup>148</sup> See Brown, *Manipulating the Ether*, 9-25; Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (442); Abbott, *The Exemplary Presidency*, 3-21 (p. 10; 20).

<sup>149</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259-282 (p. 266).

<sup>150</sup> Levine, 'The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences', 1369-99 (p. 1381).

<sup>151</sup> Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 259-272 (p. 259). Cantril and Allport maintain that '[t]he immediacy and reality of the radio voice make it a quasi-personal stimulus. It is responded to in much the same way as are voices in natural life' (p. 259).

<sup>152</sup> Douglas, *Listening In*, 100-123 (p. 123).

<sup>153</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 342-407 (p. 359).



order'.<sup>154</sup> Bonny's ironic attitude towards listening to a comic radio show while experiencing first-hand the hard conditions which the government tried to address through programs like the New Deal exemplifies that, like the leftists, she expects more from political plans designed to solve proletarian deprivations.

In a later climactic scene, Bonny merges her voice with the political voice of poet Vachel Lindsay, whose poem 'The Leaden-Eyed' appears in the novel. When Larry asks how she finds working on the farm, Bonny makes known her frustration about the poverty she sees and experiences:

"I wouldn't mind the starving once in a while if there was any point to starving. As Vachel Lindsay put it:

'Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly;

Not that they die, but that they die like sheep'". (243)

The recitation of these lines from 'The Leaden-Eyed' directly to Larry demonstrates that Bonny here, unlike when she recites a lyric about a stereotyped lover, both propels herself into the narrative of the poem and identifies with the revolutionary working class, emulating Lindsay and refusing to live like a sheep in the flock.

In two of Lindsay's 1914 poems, 'Lincoln' and 'Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight', which are not quoted in the novel yet which Conroy may have come across since he was familiar with the poet's work, Lindsay portrays Lincoln as a mythical figure.<sup>155</sup> The first poem sees Lincoln as having an 'imperial soul', the sense of heroism which Lindsay wanted to arouse in his audience,<sup>156</sup> and the second one portrays him as walking in the streets of Springfield, Illinois, and thinking about Americans in need: 'Yea, when the sick world

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<sup>154</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259-282 (p. 266).

<sup>155</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *The Congo and Other Poems* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), p. iv, <google books>.

<sup>156</sup> Lindsay, 'Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight', in *Poems and Songs Celebrating America*, ed. by Ann Braybrooks (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2014), p. 128.

cries, how can he sleep?’<sup>157</sup> The absence of these poems from Bonny’s narrative echoes the absence of Lincoln’s name at the novel’s close, and this indicates Bonny’s problematised view about Lincoln. By quoting Lindsay’s protesting lines from ‘The Leaden-Eyed’ rather than those about Lincoln, Bonny seeks justice for the oppressed without necessarily seeing Lincoln as a symbol to revive. Like Mother, who ultimately no longer invokes Lincoln’s individualised dream in Larry, Bonny, referring to specific lines by Lindsay, embodies radical, collective notions.

This depiction of a woman’s intellectual entry into a modified class awareness, manifested by the conflation of Bonny’s prose with Lindsay’s revolutionary poetic lines, reinforces the narrative’s multi-voiced structure and its political message. Bakhtin maintains that the speeches of characters, narrators, and authors, and the insertion of different genres to prose writings, are key elements of the artistic construction of novels and to the creation of ‘heteroglossia’, the dialogisation, multiplicity, and variety of the novel’s ‘social voices’.<sup>158</sup> Drawing on Bakhtin, one might say that Conroy thrives on using the *skaz* to present Bonny’s voice in multiple situations to give Bonny, albeit in one instance, voicedness with Lindsay. Bakhtin, analysing double voicedness in Dostoevsky’s writings, argues that the usage of the *skaz* is associated with narrative complexity, for the story-teller ‘belongs in most cases to the lower social strata, to the common people [...] and he brings with him oral speech’.<sup>159</sup> Something similar occurs when Larry, the storyteller in Conroy’s novel, presents voices from the working class, including his own. Bonny’s voice, which Larry conveys and which carries Lindsay’s poetic voice, then, mimics Larry’s, for her narrative voice performs a similar purpose to Larry’s when he combines his voice with Bonny’s and the other characters in the novel. Through this polyvocality, the presence of which Jessica Berman notes in this

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>158</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, pp. 262-3.

<sup>159</sup> ‘Discourse in Dostoevsky’, in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 181-267 (p. 192).

novel,<sup>160</sup> Bonny's double-voiced speech skews Larry's narrative about working-class experiences towards the construction of a woman's politically expressed ideas. In a manner similar to Harriett, whose songs deepen *Not Without Laughter*'s modernist structure and its underlying radical theme, Bonny's dialogised speech feeds into *The Disinherited*'s experimental form and conveys that women like Bonny are not apolitical. By connecting her voice to Lindsay's in Larry's presence, Bonny unfolds a submerged point within the novel that spurs Larry's alignment with proletarian ideas.

Female-authored proletarian novels from the Third Period portray similar situations. Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* (1930) also deploys an episodic structure in its representation of lovers and strike activists Fer Deane and Mamie Lewes as self-sacrificing characters modelled after strike leaders Fred Beal and Ella May Wiggins, the latter of whom was shot on her way to the picket line. In analysing this representation in particular and proletarian collective novels in general, Barbara Foley maintains that *Strike!* records a real event, the Gastonia strike, to which Vorse adds 'her own embellishments'.<sup>161</sup> Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* (1932) also depicts this strike in its third-person narrative. The protagonist, Bonnie McClare, the family breadwinner and mother of five children, who writes in the novel's context Wiggins' 'Mill Mother's Lament' about protesting and working mothers, is eventually murdered during a strike. These sentimentalised and political actions make Bonnie McClare's character, as Jennifer A. Williamson argues, comparable to Wiggins.<sup>162</sup> In the early twentieth century, many women in America worked as domestic servants and, sometimes, in the mills, but these were not the only positions available for them. Women like Vorse, Wiggins, and Flynn joined unions, participated in and led strikes and tried to politicise

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<sup>160</sup> See Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, pp. 255-6.

<sup>161</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 398-442 (p. 407).

<sup>162</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 23-58 (p. 30).

their domestic sphere.<sup>163</sup> Conroy, potentially aware of this political context, crafts a realist novel by recording in verse-prose episodes the influence of the market crash on proletarians while adding his own embellishments to portray Bonny's political role.

Bonny's mission in Conroy's novel, which is composed of multiple voiced scenes, is to thoughtfully propel a man with a proletarian background into the radical sphere. Bonny motivates Larry to read leftist texts, critically think about them, and finally become a political activist, and this growing influence is not shallow, mythical, or sentimentalised. '[M]entors', to borrow Foley's terminology in her analysis of proletarian fictional autobiographical novels, encourage the protagonist's class-consciousness by offering 'an education in the theory of rebellion'.<sup>164</sup> Both experience and other characters' teachings or actions trigger the protagonist's proletarian awareness.<sup>165</sup> Douglas Wixson disagrees with this view when it comes to *The Disinherited*, suggesting that Larry, unlike protagonists in conventional proletarian novels, 'stumbles into an open-ended political commitment [by chance]' rather than by the influence of other scenes that Conroy presents in the story.<sup>166</sup> However, the narrative multiplicity helps Larry to political consciousness and fosters his revolutionary attitudes. The radical character Hans, for instance, whom Foley uses as an example, influences Larry's transformation into a revolutionary.<sup>167</sup> This evolution, which is traced in the novel over the narration of multiple scenes, is also germinated by Bonny, whose voice Larry repeatedly propels into the narrative.

According to Foley, 'mentors are often actual persons with whom the author/narrator

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<sup>163</sup> Elizabeth Flynn, for instance, as a historian emphasises about Irish women in this context, 'worked actively for the International Workers of the World [...] She attributed her activism to a determination to avoid the limitations of her mother's domestic world'. See Walter Bronwen, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place, and Irish Women* (London: Routledge, 2000), 47-59 (p. 52).

<sup>164</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 284-320 (p. 306). Foley argues that, like Gold's *Jews Without Money*, *The Disinherited* functions as a proletarian fictional autobiography in which the narrator plays a key role in creating 'his/her own text' (p. 298).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 319. This education gained from 'social groups', Foley maintains, is 'collective' rather than individualised (p. 284.).

<sup>166</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 325-355 (p. 345).

<sup>167</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, p. 308.

entered into debate and not simply novelistic constructs'.<sup>168</sup> Bonny's political ideas function accordingly for they have an effect on Larry over a short period of time, and this is manifested once Larry sees her reading a leftist magazine at her father's place in Detroit:

When I reached home that evening, I was surprised to find Bonny Fern in the sitting room. She said hello, and continued reading a magazine with a striking cartoon in black and white on the cover.

"What's that, a new comic magazine?" I asked.

"It's not so comic," she replied handing it to me with a smile.

[...] "It's *The New Proletariat*. Ever see it before?"

I told her I never had. She left me reading the magazine and I read it till ten o'clock without getting sleepy. (195-6)

Bonny's reading of this magazine, with its alliance with the proletariat asserted by its title and cover, functions as a historical analogy. Between the years 1932-5, Conroy edited the magazine *The Anvil*, which contained proletarian prose and verse. He contends in a 1973 introduction to his edited anthology, *Writers in Revolt*, that 'Much of the stuff we published in *The Anvil* was rough-hewn and awkward, but bitter and alive from the furnace of experience—and from participants, not observers, in most instances'.<sup>169</sup> Wixson, calling Conroy a 'worker-writer', maintains that in journalistic and narrative writings, he 'gave voice to the voiceless, permitted them to be heard',<sup>170</sup> and that he wrote about Midwestern working-class issues from leftist perspectives.<sup>171</sup> The fictionalised left-wing magazine in his novel is an example of him bringing in his experiences writing about the proletariat and, thus, politicising Bonny's voice when she speaks about a leftist magazine in order to indicate the depth of her influence on Larry.

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>169</sup> Conroy, 'Introduction', in *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology*, eds. by Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson (New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1973), ix-xi (p. xiv).

<sup>170</sup> Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 1-9 (p. 4).

<sup>171</sup> Conroy wanted to meet the leftist expectation of his radical contemporaries, Joe Kalar and Philip Rahv. See Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 1-9 (p. 4).

The issue of *The New Proletariat* that Bonny gives to Larry, and which presumably stands for *The Anvil* or even *New Masses*, stimulates Larry to relate its cover's picture to the reality of his and other workers' life conditions, for Larry assumes it is a comic when he sees the striking cartoon on its cover. However, this type of imagery, created by leftist cartoonists like Art Young and William Gropper and displayed on the cover of proletarian magazines,<sup>172</sup> often addresses deeper political messages. Virginia Marquardt looks at illustrations that appeared in *New Masses* in the late twenties and early thirties in particular, and argues that the illustrators attempt to correlate their artwork with the magazine's displayed working-class struggles.<sup>173</sup> In both forms of expression – the magazine's visual and written texts – to use Janet Zandy's idea in her introduction to an anthology about American women's working-class literature, arts and politics are interwoven to establish artistic and social commentary.<sup>174</sup> Conroy's verse-prose proletarian novel also aims to emphasise a collective political message. Bonny, embodying aspects of this experiment, encourages Larry's reading of a proletarian photo-text magazine, thus motivating him to develop radical ideas that can be translated into militant actions. As an agent of Larry's education, Bonny shares aims that proletarian magazines from the early 1930s displayed in their illustrations and writings.

By whetting his appetite for reading a leftist magazine, Bonny propels Larry into thinking about how to translate the magazine's two forms of expression, the visual images and written texts, into proletarian actions. Immediately after receiving his positive review of *The New Proletariat*, she responds: "You should get interested in something like that" (196). Rather than leaving him unguided, Bonny reveals to Larry her refined radical thinking, which includes her questioning of the documented realities in revolutionary writings:

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<sup>172</sup> See Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, p. 27.

<sup>173</sup> Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "'New Masses' and John Reed Club Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style', *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 12 (Spring 1989), 56-75.

<sup>174</sup> Zandy, ed., 'Introduction', in *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings: An Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990), 1-13 (p. 9).

“My sociology prof. talked to me about all that. He says that what the radicals say is true in theory, but that they’re laboring under delusion in believing that the actual proletariat takes any interest whatever in its self-appointed leaders and saviors. It’s a game, Larry, a kind of escape from reality. You’ll find comfort in it if you can make yourself believe that workers are brave and intelligent as those soap-box orators do. I half believe it myself”. (196)

Conroy’s novel incorporates multi-voiced rhetoric by which readers can connect the novel’s voices to understand deliberately unsaid meanings, much like the decade’s proletarian magazines that displayed cartoons, paintings, and pictures alongside political writings. Helen Langa analyses this integration in *New Masses*, and argues:

In its pages as well as on its covers, images and texts worked independently but symbiotically to create a double-voiced rhetorical structure that reinforced the significance of issues the journal wished to emphasize.<sup>175</sup>

To borrow an argument about the intersections of words and images in African American proletarian magazines like *Crisis*, the written texts in such a magazine complement and emphasise the meaning first observed from the integrated visual texts.<sup>176</sup> Larry’s having read and praised *The New Proletariat* suggests that when he reads the magazine, he comes across proletarian texts that fill in what its cover, which he first assumes to be comic, cannot tell by itself. Bonny’s way of thinking teaches him to consider how revolutionary writings might be a step toward broadening this proletarian knowledge.

Bonny, who loses her clerical job because of the stock market crash, sharpens Larry’s radical ideas indirectly, as well. In a letter addressed to Larry while he seeks better life conditions in Detroit, Bonny proves to Larry that his American dream is a myth that he

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<sup>175</sup> Helen Langa, “‘At least half the pages will consist of pictures’: *New Masses* and Politicized Visual Art”, *American Periodicals: A Journal of History and Criticism* 21. 1 (2011), 24-49 (p. 24).

<sup>176</sup> Carroll, *Word, Image, and The New Negro*, 89-121 (p. 110).

should dismantle by knowing about his people's struggles in Missouri. Bonny witnesses how Mother ends up in poverty in the Monkey Nest Camp, and her letter reports:

The bank here failed last Fall and she has lost all she had [...] But if you have any money or can get any, send it to your Mother. She's living in one of the deserted camp houses [...] The place leaks like a sieve and can't be fixed without buying material.  
(227)

This letter supports the novel's *skaz* structure<sup>177</sup> and, therefore, reinforces the fragmented but dialogically numerous radical messages in the novel. Jennifer Harrison examines *The Disinherited*'s oppositional tales, and argues that Larry fails to realise the delusion of his American dream by himself and that Mother helps him reach this conclusion.<sup>178</sup> Bonny provides even stronger assistance in her persuasive letter to him. Her written lines, integrated into the narrative by Larry, collide with Larry's past illusion, recounted when he watches Bonny and her father leave Detroit: 'There's going to be something doing in the cities. Men won't starve quietly in the world's richest country' (217). This idea fits into what James Truslow Adams calls the 'American dream' which is not a dream of gaining 'high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable'.<sup>179</sup> Bonny's letter, which reveals to Larry Mother's poverty in Missouri, prompts Larry's epiphany in realising the falsity of this dream. Before Bonny's letter, he did not know the realities of working-class struggles, and this further indicates the importance of Bonny's dialogical influences on Larry.

Bonny, the composer of this intense letter, the reader of leftist texts, and the reciter of Lindsay's 'The Leaden-Eyed', encourages revolutionary thoughts in Larry which are

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<sup>177</sup> Bakhtin argues that different meanings emerge from the novels using the *skaz*. It is the style telling a story by using various narrative devices (like letters, dialogues, monologues) which when entering a novel contributes to the construction of 'a structured artistic system' ('Discourse in the Novel', p. 262).

<sup>178</sup> Harrison, 'Oppositional Narratives', p. 107.

<sup>179</sup> Adams, *The Epic of America*, p. 404-5. Adams argues that through working together towards achieving it, the dream of gaining better opportunities becomes a reality (p. 411).



markedly different from those associated with Lincoln earlier in the novel. By introducing Larry to the idea of transforming his American dream into a collective one through working with and for the proletariat, Bonny helps him dismantle a common belief about Lincoln's status and, therefore, accelerates Larry's entrance to the realm of radicalism. Adams, the first to utilise the term 'American dream', argues that the greatness in Lincoln's personality emanates not from him spending time for and by himself but, rather, from him thinking about Americans as one group.<sup>180</sup> Bonny, who manifests to Larry the impossibility of the American dream if people do not work together to achieve it, wants Larry to fight, more than Lincoln whose mythical image was explored much like the American dream within the 1930s, with his class to collectively combat poverty.

Despite being an intellectual and political force in the novel, there is a consistent emphasis on how Bonny looks. After giving his review of the magazine Bonny gives to him, Larry declares:

I enjoyed this arguing with Bonny Fern. I exulted to think that we had found a common ground of interest. She was prettier than ever when her eyes revealed more than a casual concern in what I had to say. (197)

Bonny's beauty here intrudes but also complements Larry's political ideas, indicating that he regards her as a woman to admire for her political ideas. It resembles the kind of romance portrayed in two of the decade's strike novels. In Walter Greenwood's British proletarian novel, *Love On the Dole* (1933), a communist, also named Larry, finds in love an escape from life's harsh realities: 'To be away from it all; to have the heart's desire. Someone to love, someone to caress when the brain was weary' (*LD*, 147). However, like Conroy's Larry, Greenwood's Larry does not equate love with marriage. In Greenwood's novel, Larry says to

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 411. Adams writes that Lincoln 'rose above the poverty, ignorance, lack of ambition, shiftlessness of character, contentment with mean things and low aims which kept so many thousands in the huts where they were born' (411).

his beloved Sally: “It isn’t marriage business that matters: marriage is only for hogs anyway” (140). Sally takes her cue from Larry: “[I]f he didn’t want marriage then neither she did” (140). Literary critic Carole Snee regards Sally as ‘a pure romantic heroine’ who rebels against proletarian struggles.<sup>181</sup> Greenwood’s novel’s combination of ‘romanticism’ and ‘naturalism’, Snee argues, ‘serve[s] the mask of the reality of being a woman and both images belong in their own way to the same ideology of womanhood’.<sup>182</sup> Vorse’s *Strike!* portrays a similar relationship between strike activists Irma and Roger. When Irma argues with strike leader Fer, who receives a death threat, that women do not fear being threatened in striking contexts, Roger ‘liked her [Irma] less and respected her more’ (*Strike!*, 11). Rabinowitz comments on this Gastonia strike novel in her study of proletarian novels, and argues that this type of novel ‘traces the development of class consciousness among a group of workers, and therefore solidarity and struggle are foregrounded’.<sup>183</sup> Conroy’s novel reveals that Bonny’s agency in developing Larry’s political consciousness is not interrupted even by her attractive appearance.

Seemingly, Larry’s reading of a leftist magazine influences how he looks at Bonny. Helen Langa argues that many of *New Masses*’ writings and artistic pieces during the early 1930s represent ‘hyper-muscular masculine workers’, a representation that reinforces ‘gender expectations of male physical prowess and social authority’.<sup>184</sup> The pages and the covers of the magazine, Foley also notes, routinely showed ‘Muscular male proletarians’ and once a working-class woman ‘was featured, she was usually at the side of her husband’.<sup>185</sup> Having read a magazine with similar representations, Larry, much like Bonny herself, might

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<sup>181</sup> Carole Snee, ed., ‘Working-Class Literature or Proletarian Writing?’, in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, eds. by Jon Clark and others (Lawrence: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 165-191 (p. 174).

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 165-191 (p. 174).

<sup>183</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 63-96 (p. 80).

<sup>184</sup> Langa, “‘At least half the pages will consist of pictures’: *New Masses* and Politicized Visual Art”, 24-49 (p. 44).

<sup>185</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 213- 246 (p. 221).

construct a masculine-centric norm arguing for the militant sphere's need for men rather than women. Feminist historian Mari Jo Buhle explores the continuing exclusion of women from Socialist politics, from the time of *The Communist Manifesto*'s publication on into the twentieth century.<sup>186</sup> Women's role in the American Socialist Party were limited by the party's 'romantic conception of womanhood' that located women's influence in the domestic rather than political sphere.<sup>187</sup> Conroy, interested in leftist politics and seemingly realising the uselessness of past national ideologies, explores Marxist philosophies about the proletariat and its women's roles in *The Disinherited*. Hans the German socialist, who hopes for better opportunities for the working class through revolutionary actions, advises Larry, when he departs for Detroit, to read Marx: "Marx charted the course of civilization almost a hundred years ago" (177). Reading Marx, much like reading the proletarian literature magazine, implies that Larry takes on political ideas wherein women and their struggles are not foregrounded.

In order to fight in a sphere of radical men, Larry leaves Bonny behind, and the departure reinforces his development into a revolutionary and indicates his ironic commitment to masculine expectations, established by characters like Rollie, in order not to associate Bonny with the merely sexual. Larry describes how he controls his emotions towards Bonny and how he ultimately decides not to marry her:

"Well, be as careful as you can," she amended tearfully. Her eyes appealed almost frantically, but I turned my head. I didn't want her to take anything for granted. I

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<sup>186</sup> This exclusion of women from socialist politics corresponds with Marxist ideologies about the advancement of the proletariat's position by the support of communists and proletarians within capitalist societies, without specifically referring to women's issues like their subordination in home and work spheres. *The Communist Manifesto* focuses on working-class issues and calls for the communists' and proletarians' cooperation to solve them, without paying a direct close attention to women's concerns. In their manifesto, Marx and Engels maintain: 'The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat'. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 95.

<sup>187</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 1-48 (p. 10).

thought she looked prettier every year, even if she was tanned and freckled and her hands rough and red. But I had to be free. (283)

Bonny's rough red hands possibly signify her labour on the farm and the radicalism she encourages in Larry, even during her final appearance in the novel. This scene, which considers marriage as hindering proletarian men's practice of revolutionary goals, corresponds with the misogynist view Rollie proclaims to Larry in a song about getting married, thus indicating Larry's adoption of 'masculinist' ideas.<sup>188</sup> Despite this adoption, Larry's not marrying Bonny, his politically aware friend, indicates that he detaches himself from what Helen Hacker calls 'bourgeois marriage'.<sup>189</sup> Hacker examines the *Manifesto*,<sup>190</sup> which criticises bourgeoisie's way of living,<sup>191</sup> and argues that in 'bourgeois marriage' Marx believed that 'women were regarded essentially as instruments of production'.<sup>192</sup> *The Disinherited's* last sketch rejects transforming Larry's and Bonny's friendship into a marriage. Larry, whose encounter with Wilma ends with him thinking of the chaste warrior Joan of Arc, therefore refuses to oppress Bonny's body, which symbolises working-class radicalism. His departure from Bonny, despite her agitation of his proletarian awareness, is ironically part of his conversion into a revolutionary. Freedom to be a political activist, like freedom to be an unexploited worker, as Rollie suggests, necessitates being single, albeit by reflecting an apparently masculine proletarian's attitude: that women thwart their partners' proletarian goals.

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<sup>188</sup> Foley argues that Larry's eventual repudiation of marrying Bonny despite loving her suggests a 'masculinist' way of thinking: 'girl wants to marry boy, marriage is a trap, boy must get out if he is to be "free" to do what he has to do'. *Radical Representations*, 284-320 (p. 314).

<sup>189</sup> Hacker, 'Marx, Weber and Pareto on the Changing Status of Women', 149-162 (p. 151)

<sup>190</sup> Hacker applies the *Manifesto's* socialist ideas about the working class' subordination to the bourgeoisie in order to analyse issues proletarian women encountered within their domestic and work life in modern society.

<sup>191</sup> As part of its criticism to bourgeoisie's way of living, the *Manifesto* considers the bourgeois partner as exploitative of his wife's body: 'The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production'. Marx continues that the bourgeois partner 'hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and naturally, can come to no other conclusion that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women'. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, p. 101.

<sup>192</sup> Hacker, 'Marx, Weber and Pareto on the Changing Status of Women', 149-162 (p. 151)

In proletarian novels that adhere to societal norms or confined politics, to borrow Robin Kelley's argument about the decade's African American working-class poetry, 'proletarian realism consciously evinced masculine images and defined class *struggle* as a male preserve'.<sup>193</sup> This masculinist presentation as well as the adoption of misogynistic views are obvious, more so than in *The Disinherited* or even in *Not Without Laughter*, in John Dos Passos' 1932 proletarian experimental novel, *1919*, written while Dos Passos was aligned with the Communist Party. In this second volume from the *U.S.A.* trilogy, a minor character called Nick, who aims to better the proletariat's position, advises his friend Ben, who also aspires to become a revolutionary, to beware of women. 'A revolutionist', Nick teaches Ben, 'ought to be careful about the girls he went with, women took a class conscious working man's mind off his aims, they were the main seduction of capitalist society' (*1919*, 722). Conroy explores similar attitudes through Larry's voice, which conveys multiple voices, including Bonny's and her revolutionary attitudes. In a letter to Conroy, Dos Passos, who later wrote *The Big Money*, which is examined in the following chapter, called *The Disinherited* 'an absolutely solid, unfaked piece of narrative'.<sup>194</sup> Conroy depicts working-class struggles and Larry carries the militant role of combatting them, a role evoked by women like Bonny. Hughes, as discussed in the previous chapter, also manages to circumvent the masculinist portrayal through representing women who mask protesting ideas. Conroy, despite giving Larry the fighting responsibility as Dos Passos does in *1919*, also highlights the influence of women with political ideas.

In a contribution to the study *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, Fredrick J. Hoffman argues that *The Disinherited* is a 'conversion' proletarian novel, for the protagonist in such a

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<sup>193</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 103-121 (p. 112). Italics in original.

<sup>194</sup> qtd., in Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 325-55 (p. 328).

novel evolves into affiliating himself with his class after dismissing it.<sup>195</sup> Josep M. Armengol recently argues that proletarian novels involving coal-miners, like *The Disinherited*, intensify men's proletarian masculinity (embodied in involvement in strikes or revolutions).<sup>196</sup> Conroy's Larry adopts a similar position, especially when he joins Hans, whose voice is reported, like Bonny's, through Larry's narration. Foley comments on Hans' limited role in the narrative:

[T]he mentor's role in the narrative is confined almost completely to the level of 'story,' with virtually no over-the-shoulder commentary directed at the reader. Indeed, even within the 'story' this figure plays a catalytic rather than a casual role; his appearances are 'happenings' rather than 'actions'.<sup>197</sup>

Bonny's ideas, also confined to the level of Larry's narration, are not 'happenings', nor are they translated into her own militant 'actions'; yet, they catalyse Larry's class-consciousness.

Bonny's voice, integrated into many sketches, indicates Conroy's experiment to insert an influential female voice into a narrative including many male, working-class voices. Notably, Conroy's leftist literary journal, *The Anvil*, published episodes from *The Girl* and proletarian short stories by Le Sueur wherein women's voices are integrated to these of the proletariat men.<sup>198</sup> In 'They Follow Us Girls' (1935), for instance, Le Sueur's narrator maintains a friendship with an old man, Mr. Hess, whose speech about a meeting with workers is included in the story's narrative. Jessica Berman looks at other writings by Le Sueur, and observes Le Sueur's as well as Conroy's inclusion of multiple voices in their

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<sup>195</sup> Hoffman reads a selection of proletarian novels based on Walter Rideout's classification of the radical novel into four types (the Strike, the Conversion, the Bottom Dogs, and Bourgeois Decay). Fredrick J. Hoffman, 'Aesthetics of the Proletarian Novel', in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, ed. by David Madden (London: Southern Illinois UP, 1968), 184-93 (p. 190).

<sup>196</sup> Armengol contends that male protagonists in such novels are depicted as "tough" guys resisting stoically as victims of a brutal political economy'. Armengol, 'Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the Male Body in 1930s American Culture and Literature', 59-68 (p. 63).

<sup>197</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 284-320 (p. 309).

<sup>198</sup> See Le Sueur's 'Sequel to Love' and 'They Follow Us Girls' in *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology*, eds. by Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson (New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1973), 106-113; Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 97-136 (p. 99).

proletarian novels. To Berman, unlike Le Sueur's novel, *The Disinherited* brings together 'a compendium of (mostly male) voices'.<sup>199</sup> To these male voices, Conroy introduces Bonny's voice through Larry's. Although her voicedness has not facilitated Bonny becoming a political activist and comrade like Vorse's, Lumpkin's, and Le Sueur's fictionalised women, Bonny, similarly to Mr. Hess' role in Le Sueur's story for *The Anvil*, introduces Larry to the idea of allying himself with the proletariat.

In the novel, Bonny is an educated friend but, notably, not a wife or a lover waiting for a marriage proposal like the stereotyped single women in the novel's songs. Like Joan of Arc, whose opposite, to Larry, is Wilma, Bonny receives Larry's chaste admiration throughout the novel. Further, Bonny's ideas about radicalism emerge in the novel's middle and late sketches. As a woman, Bonny is stuck between political action and inaction, and Larry is the one whom she, much like Mother, wants to act on her behalf. These characteristics appear in several episodes, and this develops Bonny's character and her influences on Larry.

The novel's songs display society's narrow view that women are passive lovers, destructive wives, or breeding mothers. The novel's other women about whom Larry briefly reports, despite not actually advancing Larry's class awareness, juxtapose some of these images. Wilma and Helen, with whom Larry has sex, allude to controlling one's desire and fighting for the proletariat. Wilma, who silently accepts Larry's sexual advances in Missouri, and Helen, who by contrast expressively protects herself against them when she moves to Detroit, confront Larry's assumption that single women are merely objects of men's desire. His aunt Jessie, who is secretly pregnant with Rollie's child, and Lena, the childless wife who says that women, like men, deserve to have affairs outside of marriage, further disrupt

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<sup>199</sup> Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 237-80 (p. 264).

Larry's or their society's male-centric maxims that wives are destructive and committed to domestic constraints

Over the course of numerous sketches, Mother is neither sentimentalised like a 'breed[ing]' mother nor stereotyped as a 'Bridget', whose image was created to describe the Irish maids as 'slovenly, vulgar', and uneducated.<sup>200</sup> Rather, like Hughes' Hager, who is not simply a 'mammy', Mother deviates from such stereotypes through her way of living and her influences on Larry's proletarian development. Further, through her cooperation with strikers and African American proletarians, as well as her political aspirations for Larry, she shares traits with Mother Jones. Bonny, whose attractive appearance and political voice dominate several episodes, also advances Larry's affiliation with the proletariat. While the sexual dimensionality of her character is confined, her political ideas are expressed to Larry in multi-voiced narratives. Her ideas, further, function like Harriett's songs, which tighten *Not Without Laughter*'s lyrical-narrative structure and its masked proletarian content. Bonny's appearance and voice, which eventually stimulate Larry's proletarian alignment, facilitate the novel's polyphonic construction and its transformed political message from individualised into radical.

*The Disinherited*, a composite of lyrical-episodic layers of proletarian representation, like Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, deepens, explores, and contradicts sexist views about women and indicates both possibilities and limits of female agency. Douglas Wixson, noting a similarity between these two novels and Gold's *Jews Without Money*, contends that 'Eschewing the orthodoxy and doctrinaire attitudes of proletarian literature, these three books revealed the intimate terms on which the authors had lived with their subject, the experience of marginalized groups in American life'.<sup>201</sup> In recording working-class experiences in songs and sketches written in *skaz*, the style of telling a story in a first-person narrative wherein

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<sup>200</sup> Schultz, 'The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget', 176-212 (p. 181).

<sup>201</sup> Wixson, 'Introduction', 1-24 (p. 5).



characters' voices are integrated, Conroy's narrator sometimes conforms to stereotypes about women, but these images are challenged elsewhere in the novel's prose. Conroy mentioned to his interviewer Robert Thompson that in this novel he writes like a reporter, 'So I didn't sweat over techniques or read books on techniques or anything. I just sat down and wrote'.<sup>202</sup> Despite writing apparently simple prose as he and some of his critics claim, the novelist challenges past American ideals which were often invoked within the proletarian movement, such as the mythologised Lincoln and the recently codified 'American dream'. *The Disinherited* indicates that women, although societally stereotyped within proletarian contexts, assist the transformation of individualised American hopes into collective ones. This role, although not a necessarily active one, facilitates militant masculine uprising with and for the working class. Like *Not Without Laughter*, Conroy's novel presents the formation of a male character into a leader under the influences of women with agency and class consciousness.

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<sup>202</sup> Conroy; Thompson, 'An Interview with Jack Conroy', 149-173 (p. 159).

## CHAPTER III

### **John Dos Passos' *The Big Money*: Aspects of Women's Autonomy and Social Agency**

In *The Disinherited*, which is made up of popular songs and a first-person episodic narrative, Jack Conroy explores the American dream ideal and offers limits and possibilities to women's political agency. This position is ultimately manifested when Bonny, the reader and reciter of revolutionary writings, ends up helping her father on the farm while her lover Larry becomes a radical political activist. John Dos Passos praised the reality portrayed in this novel.<sup>1</sup> He also shared Conroy's strategy of representing misogynistic views in his trilogy *U.S.A.*, principally in the first two volumes *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel's* and *1919's* popular songs, newspaper headlines, biographical and poetic segments, and even in these volumes' central story narratives. His withdrawal from the Communist Party while working on the last volume, *The Big Money* (1936), which uses the same experimental elements, however, appears to have made him open to more liberal views about women, including their involvement in political activities.

Janet Casey, in the introduction to *The Novel and the American Left*, maintains that 1930s leftist modernist novels like Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* portray personal and social vicissitudes with 'lively dynamism', tending to change the proletariat's and even its women's position.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, in a study of the novelist's writings, Casey argues:

It would, of course, be entirely inaccurate to call Dos Passos a 'feminist' writer in the sense in which we use the term today, but his appropriation of the feminine as a site for radicalist challenges, together with his attempt to historicize women, to give them voice, place, and legitimacy in his rendering of the national consciousness, place him squarely

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<sup>1</sup> See Conroy, 'Introduction', *The Disinherited: A Novel of the 1930s*, 25-31 (p. 26); Wixson, *Worker-Writer*, 325-55 (p. 328).

<sup>2</sup> Casey, ed., '(Left) Contexts and Considerations', in *The Novel and the American Left*, ix-xviii (xvii).

within a discourse that addresses the function of the feminine in both modernist and socially radical terms.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Denning, discussing publications from the Popular Front, including *U.S.A.*, argues that towards the end of the 1930s '[w]omen were usually imagined as "auxiliaries" in the struggle',<sup>4</sup> and that implicitly and occasionally a 'Popular Front feminism' did start to emerge during these years.<sup>5</sup> It would be imprecise to suggest that Dos Passos was a Popular Front feminist. However, in *The Big Money*, published at the dawn of the Front's cultural movement, he does try to enlarge women's liberties and explore their agency in the proletarian struggle.

Within the Popular Front's cultural context, proletarian literature continued to emerge and, further, tended to intensify the portraiture of working-class struggles without avoiding 'modernism',<sup>6</sup> the blending of narrative genres,<sup>7</sup> or the use of 'documentary [aesthetic]'.<sup>8</sup> And, obviously, Dos Passos wrote his proletarian trilogy *U.S.A.* in a modernist style, viewing the same object from technically different perspectives to represent political meanings with minor variations. All of *U.S.A.*'s volumes employ the integration of four narrative devices: Newsreels, the documentary pieces which display popular songs, news headlines, and advertisements; the Camera Eye, intended to represent the author's stream of consciousness; biographical sketches about historical figures; and third-person narratives about fictionalised characters. *The Big Money*, which pursues this experimental integration, presents women from multiple angles: in thirteen scattered Newsreels, two Camera-Eye segments, a biographic sketch about dancer Isadora Duncan, and two separate narratives about women who are partly modelled on historical women from early twentieth century. These portrayals

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<sup>3</sup> Casey, *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-17 (p. 4).

<sup>4</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front* 3-50 (p. 32).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 32. See Susman, *Culture as History*, 150-83 (p. 212).

<sup>6</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 86-128 (pp. 109-10).

<sup>7</sup> Tracy, *Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, 141-181 (p. 158).

<sup>8</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115-159 (p. 118).

differ from one another. In the non-story segments, there is a reductive characterisation to female liberties but also an increase to women's sense of commitment to people in need. The central narratives attempt to provide the female protagonists with both personal autonomy and social agency, albeit in different ways, despite these characters' experience of sexual exploitation, pregnancy, and attempted abortion.

This chapter argues that in the novel's four modes, Dos Passos – who was disappointed with the Communist Party, which marginalised women's issues in the 1920s-1930s despite its female members' political activity,<sup>9</sup> – provides a distinct account of women's autonomy and their social agency. This representation counters traditional gendered conventions about women at that time. 'The career-oriented wife' was certainly seen by some in the 1930s as 'a selfish, exploitative neurotic who callously neglected her home for fame and wealth'.<sup>10</sup> Working women during the 1920s-1930s apparently fit into this description, even though their labour most typically took place in spheres associated with 'feminine' qualities (like dancing, acting, and clerical work).<sup>11</sup> Hollywood actresses like Mae West, for example, neglected their domestic roles, performed sensual scenes in their films, and achieved fame and wealth.<sup>12</sup> Left-wing radicals like Robert Forsythe criticised these performances,<sup>13</sup> potentially because of their promotion of the American dream and their failure to connect with proletarian struggles. Even female members of the Communist Party in the 1920s-1930s were predominantly assigned to activities that were either adjunctive or known as women's work.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, issues such as birth control and abortion were

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<sup>9</sup> Weigand, *Red Feminism*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 61-137 (70).

<sup>11</sup> See Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 86-109 (p. 101).

<sup>12</sup> See Ware, *Holding their Own*, 171-195 (p. 183); Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, 95-120 (p. 96).

<sup>13</sup> See Robert Forsythe, 'Mae West: A Treatise on Decay', *New Masses* (October, 1934), p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Several feminist historians (Susan Ware, Rosalyn Baxandall, Kate Weigand) have discussed women's ambivalent position in the 1920s and 30s Communist Party. For further details, consult: Ware's 'Women on the Left: The Communist Party and its Allies'; and Baxandall's 'The Question Seldom Asked: Women and the

secondary to the Communist Party,<sup>15</sup> for the party's main concern was, much like the Americanised Marxist ideal that Larry in *The Disinherited* adopts, to alleviate proletarian struggles with the help of male radicals. In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos feminises proletarian ideas, more so than Conroy in *The Disinherited*, and in contrast to the first two volumes of *U.S.A.*, and this shift gives increased liberty and agency to his portrayed women.

In order to examine the complex layers of women's autonomy and working-class responsibility in the novel's four modes, this chapter uses a wide range of cultural details. It refers to scholarship examining the author's decision to include narrative sections and interpolated dislocating sections in the trilogy and the influence of his detachment from the Communist Party on *The Big Money*'s themes. It also refers to studies examining the position of the working American women within the novel's associated historical period, covering the period from the 1910s to the early 1930s. These details are integrated into analysis of the chapter's three sections. As Barbara Foley observes: '[t]hroughout *U.S.A.*, the fictional narratives are kept separate from the Newsreels, biographies, and Camera Eye passages interspersed among them'.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, the chapter discusses the representations of female characters in the novel's central narratives separately from those in the other modes.

The first section argues that while Dos Passos presents women in the Newsreels as passive or emotionally confused, or as working women whose autonomy is confined by gendered work, he exemplifies, principally through his use of stream of consciousness in two Camera Eyes, women's developing proletarian consciousness in words and deeds. Further, with notable ambiguity, he writes a biographical segment about only one artist woman, the dancer Isadora Duncan, whom he introduces to a male public world without unfolding the sensual liberty Duncan gained through her dancing work. Rather, he suggests that Duncan's

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CPUSA', in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, eds. by Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, and others (New York: Monthly Review, 1993), 141-162; Weigand's *Red Feminism*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 117-140 (p. 124).

<sup>16</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 398-442 (pp. 433-4).

intentions to work ‘for the people’ (899) are left unfulfilled by her tragic death. The central narratives’ female protagonists, Hollywood actress Margo Dowling and social worker Mary French, liberate themselves from gendered tensions and limitations and, further, help those in need to escape from social struggles. The degree of their personal and social agency, however, differs. Margo, who is examined in the second section of this chapter, develops into a bourgeois actress whose liberty, work, and support for others echo aspects from Mae West’s life. The third section argues that Mary is more active than Margo and even the late nineteenth-century New Woman, whom Thorstein Veblen, the social critic whose biography Dos Passos structurally places next to Mary’s narrative, describes as self-sacrificing working women who financially supported their communities.<sup>17</sup> Mary both conducts herself with the utmost social allegiance to the working class and surpasses the bounds of sexual exploitation. Her social services, the chapter highlights, resemble those of historical radical women such as Mary Heaton Vorse, Josephine Herbst, Meridel Le Sueur, Mother Ella Reeve Bloor and Peggy Dennis. Before closing this analysis, I want to place my argument within the context of literary critical views about the changes in Dos Passos’ social and gender politics which are reflected in *The Big Money*.

The novelist’s contemporary critics, such as Granville Hicks, and more recent commentators, including Robert C. Rosen, Melvin Landsberg, and Janet Casey, maintain that *The Big Money* thematically differs from its preceding two volumes. Hicks, for example, argues that at this stage of his career Dos Passos had become disappointed in communism, and that his dissatisfaction was apparent in the writing of *The Big Money*.<sup>18</sup> Rosen similarly contends that *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* displays the novelist’s ‘muted optimism’, which later

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<sup>17</sup> Martha Banta, ed., ‘Introduction’, *Oxford World’s Classics: Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 8-19 (p. 15).

<sup>18</sup> Hicks, ‘The Politics of John Dos Passos’, 85-98 (p. 89). Hicks suggests that in this novel’s biographies and Charley Anderson’s narrative there is neither leftist commitment nor a denunciation of the Bourgeois life, and rather, there is just ‘the sour taste of frustration and futility’ (p. 94).

developed into ‘anger and militancy’ in *1919*, and eventually evolved into ‘despair’ in *The Big Money*.<sup>19</sup> Landsberg points out that the novelist’s changing his commitment to communism while writing *The Big Money* empowers this thematic difference.<sup>20</sup> Casey observes the influence of this political shift on the novelist’s portrayal of women. Some of Dos Passos’ writings, particularly those written after his break from the Communist Party, such as *The Big Money*, she argues, can be read as displaying ‘the ideological role of the feminine’ in order to reject social injustice and progressively liberate women.<sup>21</sup> Casey maintains that Dos Passos transforms his previously ‘sexist’ Marxism, which is evident in *1919*, into a less problematically masculine approach in *The Big Money*, a text that embraces the emergence and necessity of femininity as a site of ‘genuine cultural resistance’.<sup>22</sup>

Other critics disagree whether or not Dos Passos’ attitude towards the trilogy’s women characters is feminist. Dos Passos’ contemporaries Horace Gregory and Malcolm Cowley, both Communist Party members, either focused on his misogynistic depictions or suggested that the only admirable female character was the social agent Mary French. Gregory wrote in a 1936 review, for instance, that Dos Passos’ women are ‘less clearly defined than his men; they seem to follow the course of sex adventure with too much repetition, and in the last scene they all seem too much alike’.<sup>23</sup> In another 1936 review, Cowley, comparing the trilogy’s characters in a summative sentence, affirms: ‘[a]lmost all the characters are now tied up together by love or business, politics or pure hatred. And except for Mary French [...] they are like empty ships with their seams leaking, ready to go

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<sup>19</sup> Robert C. Rosen, *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 78-91 (p. 89).

<sup>20</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.* (Boulder: The Colorado Associated University Press, 1972), 187-227 (p. 221).

<sup>21</sup> Casey, *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine*, 1-17 (p. 12).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Horace Gregory, ‘Dos Passos Completes His Modern Trilogy’, in *Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Barry Maine (London: Routledge, 1988), 130-34 (p. 133).

down in the first storm'.<sup>24</sup> Rosen, reading the trilogy in the 1980s, regards it as a critique of American society and notes that Dos Passos' discussion of the proletariat's rather than women's oppression means that his attitude is 'hardly a misogynist's view of the world'.<sup>25</sup> The trilogy's women, Landsberg highlights, are socially mobile; they stand for 'conspicuous consumption' and look for higher social status, whereas their husbands are left 'remaining passive or suffering distress'.<sup>26</sup> These contradictory views indicate not only that Dos Passos portrayed women from various angles but also point to a development in his themes after his break from the Communist Party.

Jun Young Lee considers Dos Passos to be a modernist and political radical in *U.S.A.*, and argues that the trilogy's four modes are used 'with the purpose of portraying the heterogeneous aspects of American capitalism from multiple points of view [...] Through the dialectical mediation between these perspectives, American capitalism as a whole is presented as a dialectical unity'.<sup>27</sup> The totality of the history of capitalism in modern America presented through dialectical perspectives, Lee continues, reveals the radicalism the novelist wants to illustrate and which his readers are induced to discover.<sup>28</sup> This view, which is close to Jessica Berman's account of the 'polyvocality' – the heteroglossia (the multi-voicedness) in Bakhtinian terms – in Conroy's *The Disinherited*,<sup>29</sup> contributes to the progression of the themes in Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*. In an introductory note to the first volume in the trilogy, Dos Passos attributes a key function to each technique he uses:

*The Camera Eye* aims to indicate the position of the observer and *Newsreel* to give an inkling of the common mind of the epoch. Portraits of a number of real people are

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<sup>24</sup> Malcolm Cowley, 'The End of a Trilogy', in *Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, 135-39 (p. 136).

<sup>25</sup> Rosen, *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer*, 78-91 (p. 85).

<sup>26</sup> Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.*, 187-227 (p. 213).

<sup>27</sup> Lee, *History and Utopian Disillusion*, 149-194 (p. 183).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-22 (p. 13).

<sup>29</sup> See Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, pp. 255-6.



interrelated in the pauses in the narrative because their lives seem to embody so well the quality of the soil in which Americans of these generations grew.<sup>30</sup>

Movement from one mode to another germinates thematic nuances across the trilogy. 'If several people describe the same scene', Dos Passos goes on, 'the results are sure to be very different'.<sup>31</sup> Denning, quoting Dos Passos, contends that "'the four-way conveyor system" of *U.S.A.* produces a complex and contradictory kind of historical narrative'.<sup>32</sup> Other critics, such as Donald Pizer, Linda W. Wagner, John D. Brantley and Justin Edwards, observe, too, the cumulative nature of *U.S.A.*'s devices and volumes. Wagner, for example, argues that the employment of this structure provides readers 'with a spectrum of scenes and images, from which some sense of the real "history" being lived—whether personal or social—could accumulate'.<sup>33</sup> Through this artistic assembling, Wagner concludes, Dos Passos 'wrote book after book' in this trilogy 'in search of the national identity and its embodiment in a convincing American hero'.<sup>34</sup> This construction of stylistically different devices is also in search of female radical agencies.

*The Big Money* was written in the mid-1930s but covers the period from around 1910 to the late 1920s and presents the culmination of the thematic development, including the tendency toward increasingly liberated women, that Casey, in her analysis of the Biographies, Newsreels and Camera-Eye segments within the historical context *U.S.A.* covers, observes across the trilogy as a whole. 'An understanding of the presentation of women and women's issues in the peripheral modes', she suggests, 'leads us to see the fictional narratives as an alternative discourse in which women become speaking subjects rather than silent objects'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Dos Passos, 'Introductory Note to *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*', in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. by Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988), 179-180 (p. 179). Italics in original.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 163-99 (p. 170).

<sup>33</sup> Linda W. Wagner, *Dos Passos: Artist as American* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), xiii-xxiv (p. xix).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>35</sup> Casey, 'Historicizing the Female in *U.S.A.*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 4.3 (1995), 249-264 (p. 250).

This chapter develops from Casey's argument and the other critical positions outlined above by investigating women's representations across all four of *The Big Money's* elements. In associated cultural and political contexts, the following section discusses women and their limited agency as presented in the peripheral modes, and the other two sections investigate Margo's and Mary's more rounded portrayals and activities.

### **The Novel's Peripheral Modes: Lack of Female Autonomy and Layers of Social Agency**

In the essay 'The Writer as Technician', published a year before *The Big Money*, Dos Passos argues that a professional writer discovers and invents his words like an engineer:

The process of writing is not very different from that of a scientific discovery and invention. The importance of a writer, as of a scientist, depends upon his ability to influence subsequent thought. In his relation to society a professional writer is a technician just as much as an electrical engineer is.<sup>36</sup>

*U.S.A.'s* Newsreels, the vignettes which encompass information from public media, appear to be presented haphazardly, as Mason Wade points out.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, these segments convey societal views,<sup>38</sup> which Dos Passos technically wants to challenge in the novel's other two peripheral modes, the Camera Eyes and the Biographies. *The Big Money's* thirteen Newsreels, documented in scattered lines from numerous ballads and newspapers headlines, demonstrate women's lack of both individual liberty and social agency. Like the few popular songs about women in Conroy's *The Disinherited*, numerous lines in *The Big Money's* Newsreels present women as silent lovers, hysterical characters, or working women in so-called 'feminine' spheres, who typically face gendered expectations and rarely develop into

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<sup>36</sup> Dos Passos, 'The Writer as Technician', 169-172 (p. 169).

<sup>37</sup> Mason Wade, 'Novelist of America: John Dos Passos', *The North American Review* 244. 2 (1937), 349-67 (p. 363).

<sup>38</sup> Charles Marz argues that the Newsreels, these 'verbal fragments', show the 'world[s]' hostility and inhumanity. Charles Marz, 'Dos Passos's Newsreels: The Noise of History', *Studies in the Novel* 11. 2 (1979), 194-200 (p. 197).

active agents within their communities. Casey emphasises that this mode includes Dos Passos' 'filtering facts' about the twenties, since the novelist 'creates the illusion of historical truth even as he subjectively refashions history'.<sup>39</sup> As Conroy tries to do in his novel's episodes, Dos Passos, via *The Big Money's* Camera-Eye segments and biographical sketch of Isadora Duncan, enlarges to varying degrees the social and emotional support that women in the Newsreel sections do not often show. This section starts with examining women's presentation in the Newsreels. It then analyses layers of women's agency in the Camera Eyes and in Duncan's biography.

A large number of the Newsreels document stylistically divergent lines from panoramic sources (popular songs, news headlines and advertisements),<sup>40</sup> and women in the early Newsreels are often portrayed in marked gendered positions. The below snapshots from several songs that Dos Passos chooses to present, for instance, record women's femininity or their passivity in love affairs:

*- 'T warn't for powder and for storebought hair*

*De man I love would not gone nowhere. (782)*

*- I am a poor girl*

*My fortune's been sad*

*I always was courted*

*By the wagoner's lad. (925)*

*-Altho' we both agreed to part*

*It left a sadness in my heart. (982)*

*-Poor little Hollywood Rose*

*so all alone*

*No one in Hollywood knows*

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<sup>39</sup> Casey, 'Historicizing the Female in U.S.A.', 249-264 (p. 251).

<sup>40</sup> These Newsreels are: XLV, LIV, LVII, LXVII, XLVIII, XLX, LII, LIII, LVII, LXIV, LI, LX, LXVI.

*how sad she's grown* (1160).<sup>41</sup>

These lines underscore women's subordination either to societal expectations or to personal griefs, a position that can determine the futility of women's lives much like the lovers whom Conroy presents in his novel's songs as waiting for marriage proposals. As the clustered news headlines seem to suggest, women's acquiescence to these confines might lead to mysterious suicides:

Woman of Mystery Tries Suicide in Park Lake (806).

OLIVE THOMAS DEAD FROM POISON (806).

GIRL SUCIDE WAS FRIEND OF

OLIVE THOMAS (815).

Kills Self Despite Wife Who Goes Mad (815).

Girl Out of Work Dies from Poison (895).

WOMAN IN HOME SHOT AS BURGLAR (903).

UNHAPPY WIFE TRIES TO DIE (903; 982).

WOMAN SLAIN MATE HELD (1132).

Notably, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*'s Newsreels XII, XIII, XV and XVIII record, in short headlines, girls' murders, and 1919's Newsreels XXI, XXII, XVII, XXXIV and XXXIX go on to cover both an increase in the murders of women and a decline in marriages and birth rates. Murder and suicide figure prominently in *The Big Money*'s Newsreels too. Women here are either the killed or the killers, indicating that they are emotionally disturbed, and this is presumably an indicator of conflicts in their lives.

The novel's interpolated advertisements indicate that even working has not helped women break from this conflicted position, for women's work opportunities during the early decades of the twentieth century were largely in domestic services, and this confinement

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<sup>41</sup> Italics in original.

collides with women's liberty. Newsreel LI condenses ads in fragmentary words and phrases, and covers jobs like:

cleaners . . . file clerks . . . companions . . . comptometer operators . . . collection correspondents . . . cooks . . . dictaphone operators . . . gentlewomen . . . multigraph operators . . . Elliott Fisher operators . . . bill and entry clerks . . . gummers . . . glove buyers . . . governesses . . . hairdressers . . . models . . . good opportunity for stylish young ladies . . . intelligent young women [...]

WE HAVE HUNDREDS OF POSITIONS OPEN. (855)

Although this last line proclaims in a full sentence with capitalised words 'WE HAVE HUNDREDS OF POSITIONS OPEN', the unnamed occupations are most likely related to the above (restricted) list, thus limiting the scope of women's agency. Lois Scharf notices this prejudice against the nature of women's work in the 1930s, and affirms that many of the decade's women worked outside their households, but only in jobs associated with so-called 'feminine' qualities. 'Nursing, home economics, teaching, office work [...] library, and social service', Scharf writes, 'all fell within the division labeled "Ladies First"'.<sup>42</sup> In this sphere, as the ads recorded by Dos Passos show, working women were expected to be 'young' and supposedly unmarried (855). Susan Ware maintains that in the 1930s 'Employers preferred to hire energetic young women as workers'.<sup>43</sup> Otherwise, women encountered discrimination, because of a societally widespread belief that breadwinning was men's responsibility.<sup>44</sup> By 1930, Michael Denning contends, 'clerical work was already the single most important occupational group for white women, despite the fact that married women were largely excluded from it'.<sup>45</sup> Due to prejudice against the nature of women's work and against married women's careers in particular, women were stuck in jobs which were 'generally sex-

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<sup>42</sup> Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 86-109 (p. 101).

<sup>43</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 21-53 (p. 27).

<sup>44</sup> See Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 140-158 (p. 142).

<sup>45</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 3-50 (p. 31).

segregated and relatively low-paying'.<sup>46</sup> It has been noted that from the early twentieth century, 'women were offered and accepted lower pay than that given to men. They were assigned the more routine, less responsible jobs'.<sup>47</sup> Even when women were working, as *The Big Money's* Newsreels also show, their perceived inferiority to men was societally ingrained.

Although the nature and the outcome of women's work feed into their passivity, Newsreel LX records in a complete sentence that 'thousands of prosperous happy women began to earn double and treble their former wages and sometimes even more immediately' (1041). The sentence here, albeit without marking the marital status of the 'thousands of [...] happy women' or utilising eye-catching capital letters, underscores that women dedicated themselves to increasing their pay. Their work becomes a means of relief and economic autonomy, despite the fact that women often had to use their wages to support their families.

Briefly emphasising this slight progress in women's positions as helpmates, the novel's last Newsreel LXVIII positions women's roles in countering social injustices next to those of men's by displaying strike organiser Ella May Wiggins' 'Mill Mother's Lament':

*But we cannot buy for our children*

*Our wages are too low*

*Now listen to me you workers*

*Both you women and men*

*Let us win for them the victory*

*I'm sure it ain't no sin* (1207).<sup>48</sup>

Wiggins, whose role in unions and strikes are fictionalised in Mary Heaton Vorse's 1930 novel *Strike!* and two years later in Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*,<sup>49</sup> demonstrated her

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<sup>46</sup> Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 1-9 (p. 4).

<sup>47</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 303-322 (p. 304); Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 1-9 (p. 8).

<sup>48</sup> Italics in original.

potential towards unifying workers despite the double burden she encountered as a low-waged working mother in the mill. In the original shorter version of this song – the version published after her death in October 1929 and which Vorse's and Lumpkin's above-mentioned novels interpolate – Wiggins closes this ballad with the lines: 'But understand, all workers,/Our union they do fear,/Let's stand together, workers,/And have a union here'.<sup>50</sup> This song by Wiggins, the working mother and strike organiser, both elevates working-class spirit and 'condemns industrial capitalism'.<sup>51</sup> Dos Passos' choice to include Wiggins' modified song, with the line 'Both you women and men', is significant for two reasons. Firstly, this inclusion suggests an endeavour towards positioning working women next to men in their countering of capitalism. Secondly, it is an attempt to disrupt a dimension of the sentimental mode which the decade's documentary journalists, photographers, and even novelists often utilise to attract sympathy for the proletarians.<sup>52</sup> An example is in *The Disinherited*'s song, 'He sent you a letter/To hold up your head', which represents mothers as helpmates in husbands' absences (*TD*, 170). Dos Passos' display of Wiggins' modified song in particular problematises the casting of working mothers as only bearing a double burden.

Through this lyrical integration, Dos Passos, as in his Third Period novels, continued to address proletarian issues, yet he replaces 'workers' with a wider term which characterises the Popular Front: 'the people'.<sup>53</sup> Kenneth Burke elucidates in 'Revolutionary Symbolism in America' that the exchange of these 'symbols', workers into people, within the Popular Front movement might enlist everyone, regardless of his or her class, to 'revolutionary thought'.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Foley, *Radical Representations*, 398-442 (p. 407).

<sup>50</sup> Wiggins, 'The Mill Mother's Lament', in *American Folksongs of Protest*, 251-52 (p. 252).

<sup>51</sup> See Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby, eds., *America's Working Women*, p. 263; Patrick Huber, 'Mill Mother's Lament: Ella May Wiggins and the Gastonia Strike of 1929', *Southern Cultures* 15.3(2009), 81-110 (p. 100).

<sup>52</sup> See Huber, 'Mill Mother's Lament', pp. 100-1.

<sup>53</sup> See Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*; Peeler's *Hope Among Us Yet*; Kazin's *On Native Grounds*; Rabinowitz's *They Must Be Represented*; Williamson's *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*.

<sup>54</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 86-128 (pp. 109-10).

<sup>55</sup> Macieski, 'American Writers Congress', in *Encyclopaedia of the American Left*, 33-34 (p. 34).

In 'The Writer as Technician', Dos Passos himself contends that although the writer's profession is putting words together, these words deal with everyone's issues. Writers, through using people's common language, he explains, position themselves as being 'on the side of the men, women and children [...] on the side, not with phrases or opinions, but really and truly, of liberty, fraternity, and humanity'.<sup>55</sup> The context in which this essay appeared substituted 'the people' for 'the workers', and 'populism', as Dickstein contends, 'made many Americans far more aware of how others lived and suffered during the Depression; it gave political energy to a more inclusive liberal tradition'.<sup>56</sup> Dos Passos' views were confined while he was a Communist Party member. An example is evident in the character of radical Ben Compton, who, when he is sentenced to be jailed, proclaims in his last appearance in *1919*: "I guess it'll be the workers will get me out" (742), indicating that radical men will help him. *The Big Money*'s inclusion of Wiggins' more populist stanza propels women's entrance into the proletarian sphere wherein women, not unlike their male counterparts, carry a collective working-class responsibility.

Two poetic Camera Eyes (the mode through which Dos Passos seeks to condense his perspectives about himself and others) articulate the necessity of women's emotional support for the proletariat by portraying their verbal and physical assistance to people in need. Moving from public Newsreels to less societal modes, like the Camera-Eye segments, suggests nuanced portrayals of women in the novel, for each artistic device functions differently. Donald Pizer suggests that *U.S.A.*'s fragmented and, sometimes, interwoven narratives (which Dos Passos explored earlier in *Manhattan Transfer*) reflects Dos Passos' employment of 'collage' and 'synthetic cubism', for Dos Passos wanted to create 'new forms in prose'.<sup>57</sup> Dos Passos sought to reach a variety of themes from this style of writing as well.

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<sup>55</sup> Dos Passos, 'The Writer as Technician', 169-172 (pp. 171-2).

<sup>56</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 462-3).

<sup>57</sup> Donald Pizer, 'John Dos Passos in the 1920s: The Development of a Modernist Style', *Mosaic* 45.4 (2012), 176



‘For the Cubists’, John Berger maintains in *Ways of Seeing*, ‘the visible was no longer what confronted the single eye, but the totality of possible views taken from points all around the object (or person) being depicted’.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Dos Passos takes various possible views from points all around his objects. He acknowledges, in one of the interviews asking about his aim in using the Camera Eyes and the other modes in *U.S.A.*, that he uses ‘the camera eye as a safety valve for my own subjective feelings. It made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier’.<sup>59</sup> The Camera-Eye mode provides the possibility of presenting a larger objectivity through Dos Passos’ reflections on his feelings about observed moments. Revealing ‘collections of stream of consciousness fragments’, Justin Edwards writes, the Camera Eyes ‘depict the consciousness of the individual subjects, expressing the thoughts, emotions and perspectives of the author’.<sup>60</sup> Pizer also maintains that Dos Passos’ ‘intensely personal inner life’ is recorded ‘in the modified stream-of-consciousness style of the Camera Eye’.<sup>61</sup> In a wider context, Martha Banta writes about American women’s images in modern arts, and she argues that ‘[w]ith “camera vision” the eye moves around restlessly [...] Nothing is focused. Nothing dominates the center. Nothing is more important than the rest until the eye chooses to make it so’.<sup>62</sup> Dos Passos’ Camera-Eye fragments function similarly, for they reflect the novelist’s understanding of himself and capture his observations of people around him.

On the political side of his life, the novelist worked for the defence of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, and criticised in 1935 communists’ invasion of a Socialist meeting in Madison Square Garden, a meeting which planned a protest against the

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51-67 (p. 55; p. 59).

<sup>58</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: The British Broadcasting Cooperation, 1972), p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> David Sanders, ‘John Dos Passos’, in *Writers at Work: The “Paris Review” Interviews*, 4<sup>th</sup> ser., ed. by George Plimpton (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 81.

<sup>60</sup> Justin Edwards, ‘The Man with a Camera Eye: Cinematic Form and Hollywood Malediction in John Dos Passos’s *The Big Money*’, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 27. 4 (1999), 245-54 (p. 247).

<sup>61</sup> Pizer, ‘John Dos Passos in the 1920s: The Development of a Modernist Style’, p. 61.

<sup>62</sup> Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 3-39 (p. 26).

suppression of Vienna's socialist workers.<sup>63</sup> Dissatisfied with the Communist Party's effectiveness in finding justice for radicals like Sacco and Vanzetti, a year before the *The Big Money*'s appearance, Dos Passos insists that the writer who writes as a technician must keep in mind that 'his real political aim, for himself and his fellows, is liberty'.<sup>64</sup> In his novel, the Camera Eye device, which reflects some of these beliefs, unfolds the power and efficiency of the poetic 'old words' that the 'haters of oppression' speak against social injustice (1136).<sup>65</sup> One of the speakers whom the Camera Eye introduces first is 'an old woman from Pittsburgh' (1157). In an unpunctuated passage, this Camera-Eye segment asks the Americans rhetorical questions:

but do they know that the old words of immigrants are being renewed in blood and agony tonight do they know that the old American speech of the haters of oppression is new tonight in the mouth of an old woman from Pittsburgh of a husky boilermaker from Frisco who hopped freights clear from the Coast to come here in the mouth of a Back Bay socialworker in the mouth of an Italian painter of a hobo from Arkansas. (1157-8)

The stream-of-consciousness style in this penultimate Camera Eye from the novel suggests the novelist's ultimate realisation about women's significance to society. Conroy's earlier novel portrays Bonny's speeches as assisting Larry's radical affiliation, and Dos Passos here, within a Camera Eye reflecting some of his views, goes on to demonstrate this connection between women's spoken words and the rise of others' class consciousness.

In the novel's last Camera Eye, two women offer emotional and physical help to a destitute man. The first 'woman wipes sweat off his streaming face with a dirty denim sleeve', and the other one, a 'barefoot girl', 'bring[s] him a tincup of water' (1208). There is a focus on one of these women's continuous solicitude even after the man's death, too:

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<sup>63</sup> Hicks, 'The Politics of John Dos Passos', 85-98 (p. 93).

<sup>64</sup> Dos Passos, 'The Writer as Technician', 169-172 (p. 170).

<sup>65</sup> See Edwards, 'The Man with a Camera Eye', 245-54 (pp. 247-8).

without help in the valley hemmed by dark strike-silent hills the man will die (my father died we know what is like to see a man die) the woman will lay him out on the rickety cot the miners will bury him. (1208)

In this segment, the destitute women's cooperation with a proletarian stranger is not unlike the scene in *The Disinherited* in which Larry's mother feeds a hungry African American in her house, indicating women's class compassion. Historian Robert McElvaine notes that in the 1930s, 'some women adopt so-called masculine values and some men adhere to "feminine" values, just as many of the poor at times adopt the acquisitive, competitive ethic and many of the rich are compassionate'.<sup>66</sup> In *The Big Money's* Camera-Eye sections, Dos Passos' persona proclaims that he has merely poetic 'words', thus identifying himself as lacking, unlike the women he observes, the art of cooperating with destitute people.

The novelist manages to attribute this social commitment, albeit with some ambivalence, to Isadora Duncan in his biographical vignette of her. Duncan is the only woman for whom Dos Passos provides a biography in *U.S.A.*, and this one reference (while including numerous biographies of male inventors, artists, and activists) seems to imply a bias against women. However, it also suggests an endeavour to introduce a talented woman in a socially 'feminine' occupation, dancing, to the public sphere of social, political, and artistic activity. 'The placement of the single female biography in the last volume of the trilogy', Casey argues, 'is therefore apt, for its position reinforces the concept of women's growing independence'.<sup>67</sup> Duncan was passionate about enabling women's emancipation through the use of their bodies to express their rejection of societal strictures,<sup>68</sup> but Dos Passos' segment on her marginalises this tendency. His reductive portrait of her apparently celebrates Duncan's attempt of benefiting her society through dancing, but also records her

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<sup>66</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 323-49 (p. 341).

<sup>67</sup> Casey, 'Historicizing the Female in *U.S.A.*', 249-264 (p. 258).

<sup>68</sup> See Dee A. Reynolds, 'Dancing Free: Women's Movement in Early Modern Dance', in *Modernism, Gender, and Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach*, ed. by Lisa Rado (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp. 247-79; Penny Farfan, *Women, Modernism and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 102-115.

tragic death. It is an ambiguous view about Duncan for presenting her unfulfilled social plans.

Dos Passos describes Duncan as a dancer who was ‘careless about her dress, couldn’t bother to keep her figure in shape [...] but a great sense of health filled the hall when the pearshaped figure [danced]’ (900), and obviously this presentation downplays the liberty Duncan wanted from dancing. As an early modernist choreographer, Duncan encouraged women ‘to participate actively in cultural production’ through the use of their bodies without dressing in constricting clothing.<sup>69</sup> She herself danced accordingly to free herself from traditional gender roles, ‘to project different images of femininity’,<sup>70</sup> and she connected ‘the emancipation of dance’ to that of women.<sup>71</sup> Mary Simonson contends that Duncan believed women ‘should be free to engage in motherhood inside or outside of marriage without penalty, and should be equal with men in personal matters, regardless of their status in the public sphere’.<sup>72</sup> Duncan’s dancing was also her means to express attitudes that are not merely sexual. Although her choice to dance without a corset appeared to be deliberately sensual, her dancing, as Ann Daly argues, signifies rejection of societal constrictions.<sup>73</sup> Daly uses Julia Kristeva’s theory in *Revolution in Poetic Language* about the representation and signification of art as a frame to read Duncan’s dancing, and postulates that Duncan’s dance ‘was about becoming a self [...] rather than about displaying a body’.<sup>74</sup> For spectators from different political backgrounds, Duncan either ‘embodied an optimistic belief in the reformability of the social and political system’ or represented ‘a paradigm of complete social

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<sup>69</sup> Farfan, *Women, Modernism and Performance*, 102-115 (p. 103).

<sup>70</sup> Reynolds, ‘Dancing Free: Women’s Movement in Early Modern Dance’, 247-79 (p. 248).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Simonson, ‘Dancing the Future, Performing the Past: Isadora Duncan and Wagnerism in the American Imagination’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 65.2 (2012), 511-555 (p. 532).

<sup>73</sup> Ann Daly, ‘Dance History and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze’, in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing*, ed. by Laurence Senelick (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), pp. 239-259.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-259 (p. 253).

rupture'.<sup>75</sup> Her uneducated audiences looked at her with ambivalent reactions, 'not knowing whether to cheer or to remain reverently silent'.<sup>76</sup> In either case, Duncan was not iconised simply as an erotic dancer by her various spectators, and Dos Passos' condensed segment about her silences the feminist power exhibited in her choreography.

The segment, further, problematises Duncan's progressive intentions. Initially, the vignette underscores that Duncan, a dancer from a poor family, sought to align herself with the proletariat:

She was an American like Walt Whitman; the murdering rulers of the world were not her people; the marchers were her people; artists were not on the side of the machineguns; she was an American in a Greek tunic; she was for the people. (899)

'I am indeed the spiritual daughter of Walt Whitman', elucidates Duncan herself in the autobiography completed just before her death in 1927, and which Dos Passos appears to have read, 'For the children of America I will create a new dance that will express America'.<sup>77</sup> Whitman, with whom Duncan identifies, as Richard Rorty argues, was an 'image' rather than a 'myth' about American progressivism in the third decade due to the absence of an 'objective' story of America at that time.<sup>78</sup> Dos Passos refers to Whitman and to Duncan's attempt to embody his intention to advance American ideals for societal improvement.<sup>79</sup> Yet, his segment on Duncan documents in few words the two reasons behind her death in a car's accident: her 'scarf' and going for 'a ride' in a suitor's car, thus affirming the un-fulfilment of her progressive aims due to external factors (902).

Penny Farfan, in a study about modernism and feminism, argues that the representation of Duncan's tragic death in biographical writings about her re-asserts

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>76</sup> Victor Seroff, *The Real Isadora* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 123-146 (p. 131).

<sup>77</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Liveright, 1927), p. 31.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought on Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 3-38 (p. 11).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 75-107 (pp. 106-7).

patriarchal order, 'cloaks "ideological abuse" and effaces her achievement as one of the great artists of the twentieth century'.<sup>80</sup> Dos Passos' mention of the two factors behind Duncan's death in particular reiterates a societal rejection of Duncan's ideas about women's emancipation. The speedy car and the scarf, explains Farfan, 'have been key factors in her [Duncan's] transformation into a cultural icon of the tragic female artist'.<sup>81</sup> The car signifies modernity, and Duncan's 'progressive views about women' and her death in an automobile accident indicate that her 'transgressions against the patriarchal social and cultural order' killed her.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, the scarf seems to symbolise the clothing Duncan wanted to free women from, for it accelerates her death.<sup>83</sup> On one hand, through mentioning these factors Dos Passos downplays Duncan's feminism. On another, he presents her ambitions to modify confining norms.

The novelist's choice to exclude Duncan's tendency towards sexual emancipation, despite celebrating her attempt in aiding her nation by her embodiment of Whitmanian ideals, makes his presentation of Duncan ambiguous. While minimising women's emancipation in this sketch as well as in the Newsreels and Camera Eyes, Dos Passos engages various women's attempts at cooperating with people from the proletariat as he moves from one mode to another. The peripheral modes provide a confinement to female liberties but also growth of women's commitment to people in need. And, the novel's central narratives develop the challenging of societal gendered norms.

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<sup>80</sup> Farfan, *Women, Modernism and Performance*, 102-115 (p. 102).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108

<sup>83</sup> Farfan's comments that 'the scarf betrays her [Duncan] just like the car and, in doing so, signals the backfiring of her modernist undertaking to "dance the freedom of woman"' (*Modernism and Performance*, pp. 108-9).

## **Margo Dowling, A Self-Directed Woman and an Anti-Capitalist Actress**

Duncan's liberty is silenced, and aspects of female class-consciousness are displayed in the novel's peripheral modes. In the novel's central narrative, the fictionalised Margo, a class transgressor and later a Hollywood movie actress, encounters occasional sexual objectification exemplified in scattered scenes (rape, pregnancy, battery, and molestation), yet she succeeds in surmounting these experiences as a self-advancing 1920s New Woman.<sup>84</sup> In addition, although previously sexually abused by her male friends, Margo emotionally and financially supports them when she starts to disguise her feelings and to work as an actress. Her representation is a development of Duncan's liberty and agency, which Dos Passos reduces in Duncan's sketch. Several critics have commented on the interrelatedness of Dos Passos' characters. John D. Brantley and Melvin Landsberg suggest that the characters in *U.S.A.* are paralleled and comparable to each other.<sup>85</sup> Donald Pizer mentions that the trilogy's characters can be read through lives recorded in its biographies.<sup>86</sup> Denning notes that 'the protagonists of the biographies are absent from the fictional narratives', and 'the fiction is dominated by figures not represented in the biographies'.<sup>87</sup> This section argues that Margo's self-advancement and acts of generosity resemble the actions of Hollywood actress Mae West during the 1920s and 1930s, and that Margo embodies indirect political messages and enlarges Duncan's feminist attitudes.

'The arts' in 1930s America, as Morris Dickstein maintains, 'at once deflected people from their problems [like poverty and unemployment] and gave them vicarious experiences,

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<sup>84</sup> Feminist historians use this term, 'new woman', to describe the working women in the 1920s, who sought to self-advancement in their jobs without regarding others' social concerns. See Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Heaven: Yale UP, 1987), 13-50 (p. 39); Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1978), 285-302 (p. 290); Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1989), 167-80 (p. 167).

<sup>85</sup> See John D. Brantley, *The Fiction of John Dos Passos* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 55-78 (p. 56); Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.*, 187-227 (p. 198).

<sup>86</sup> Pizer, 'John Dos Passos in the 1920s: The Development of a Modernist Style', 51-67 (p. 62).

<sup>87</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 163-99 (p. 175).

an alternate world, that could help them bear up'.<sup>88</sup> Susan Ware also comments on escapism through art, writing that 'Popular culture and entertainment distracted Americans from the hard times all around them'.<sup>89</sup> The decade's magazines, popular songs, radio programs, and movies 'helped to unify the country and raise American spirits' to meet the challenges of the 1930s.<sup>90</sup> Included in these escapist movies are Hollywood films which at times present women as breakers of gendered circumscriptions.<sup>91</sup> Ware proclaims that movies 'provided diversion and escape from the grim economic news coming over the radio or in the daily newspapers'.<sup>92</sup> In *The Big Money*, Margo enters the Hollywood world, and she behaves like a 1920s New Woman who worked for a living without committing herself to marriage.<sup>93</sup> Unlike some self-centred 'new' women, however, depictions of whom appear in *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* and *1919*, Margo helps male friends through kind (though sometimes manipulative) treatment. And, further, through her acting in romance scenes, she creates a world of escape for herself, the film-makers, and potentially her audience. Within this context, this section investigates Margo's portrayal.

Early in the narrative, when she was raped by her rich father-in-law, Frank, Margo appears as silent, feminised object. Ironically, though, this scene hints at Margo's capacity to transcend her circumstances and become a successful actress. Dos Passos renders Margo's reaction to the rape as: '[S]he wasn't crying. She didn't care [...] she got up and straightened her dress' (920), and the rape occurs just after Margo has been reading the *Smart Set*. This is the magazine in which appeared the John McClure poem 'I shall steal upon her' that Larry recites to Helen while attempting to seduce her in *The Disinherited* (TD, 198). That Margo accepts Frank's sexual abuse after reading this magazine suggests that she immerses herself

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<sup>88</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, xiii-xxiii (p. xix).

<sup>89</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, ix-xxii (p. xvi).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 171-195 (p. 171).

<sup>91</sup> See Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>93</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 285-302 (p. 290).



in a strategy of manipulation which enables her to behave like an actress, like a chaser of an individualised dream. In his study about the advertisement of the American dream in newspapers from late 1910s-early 1940s, Roland Marchand correlates the 'benign deception' in the advertisements of interwar newspapers to that of acting.<sup>94</sup> Marchand explains, 'Just as actors had to create illusions and employ deceptions in order to give the audience the enjoyment it expected, so advertising agents had to excel in strategies of manipulation in order to carry out their social function'.<sup>95</sup> Margo's indifference to the rape suggests her manipulation of the self as a first step in achieving her pursuit of the American dream by becoming an actress.

Another step Margo uses to achieve this personal advancement is her temporary marriage to a man of her own choice, the guitar player Tony Garrido who 'wiggled his hips like a woman as he talked' (997). Margo's marriage to Tony, described as a 'faggot', is a mask under which she seeks her autonomy (997). Initially, Margo acts like many 1920s new women, who wanted to achieve 'economic independence and professional advancement; instead of bonding with other women, they announced that they much preferred the company of men'.<sup>96</sup> Exemplifying more independent traits, Margo pays for her marriage license, and she openly accepts Tony's suggestion of a collaborative project in which she is supposed to dance while he will 'sing and play the guitar' (923). This project, which is discussed alongside Margo and Tony's marriage, is comparable to that of Duncan, whose biography precedes a section on Margo, and the poet Sergei Esenin. Concurring with Duncan's choice of marrying Esenin although Duncan 'was always against marriage',<sup>97</sup> Margo's self-serving marriage to Tony becomes the ground on which she enacts her objectives as a New Woman.

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<sup>94</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way of Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 48.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>96</sup> Ware, *Modern American Women*, p. 167.

<sup>97</sup> Duncan, *My Life*, p. 358.

While *The Big Money* overlooks the blending of personal and social issues here, in a later sketch, Margo attempts to abort her and Tony's child, but she fails; instead, the child dies after birth. This incident indicates Margo's decision to free herself from a sex role, maternity, resisting its associated gendered strictures. Actually, prejudice against married women's work during the Depression, as Leslie J. Reagan affirms, 'forced single women to delay marriage and have abortions in order to keep their jobs'.<sup>98</sup> 'Pregnancy', therefore, Ware writes, 'was often treated as a misfortune, rather than a joyous event, and in many circles abortion emerged as an acceptable (if illegal) alternative'.<sup>99</sup> Notably, from the 1910s to the mid-1920s, social activist Margaret Sanger called for birth control to enlarge women's space in public and political arenas.<sup>100</sup> Susan Currell points out in a study about eugenics in 1930s that the decade's social thinkers, like Walter B. Pitkin, encouraged birth control and the sterilisation of the mentally ill for an overall social improvement.<sup>101</sup> As an alternative to prescribed abortions, 'castor oil and quinine' were used before the 1930s to decrease the infant's size before birth, so the mother could deliver more easily; yet these drugs negatively influenced the child's health.<sup>102</sup> In *The Big Money*, Margo through choosing 'the castor oil and quinine' method in particular to abort her baby places importance on her own destiny rather than that of the baby, which is born 'blind' with a 'poor little face' and dies within a few days (976). Margo does not react emotionally to this consequence: she 'just lay[s] there in the bed hoping she'd die too' (976). She 'didn't care', further, that she 'never could have a baby' after a later surgical operation, apparently a hysterectomy (983). Through these reactions

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<sup>98</sup> Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 132-159 (p. 133).

<sup>99</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (p. 7).

<sup>100</sup> Barrett, *The Irish Way*, pp. 6-7; Linda Gordon, 'Margaret Sanger', in *Encyclopaedia of the American Left*, p. 676.; Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 285-302 (p. 297).

<sup>101</sup> Currell, 'Eugenic Decline and Recovery in Self-Improvement Literature of the Thirties', in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, eds. by Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 44-69 (pp. 59).

<sup>102</sup> Edward Shorter, *Women's Bodies: A Social History of Women's Encounter with Health, Ill-Health, and Medicine* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997) 164-176 (p. 165).

towards pregnancy, Margo challenges society's assumptions about women's confined roles, aiming to achieve her ambition of becoming an actress.

Margo, thus, can be connected to Mae West. More specifically, to utilise an analysis of West's acting in *I'm No Angel* (1933), Margo here 'does offer an example of a woman who controls her own destiny and lives life on her own terms. She openly flouts society's expectations about manners, sex roles, and whatever else happens to be in the way'.<sup>103</sup> After her attempted abortion followed by her work as a show-girl, Margo, prioritising her work over any other concern, goes on to reject her friends', Tad's and Cliff's, passes at her:

"You ought to understand, Tad [...] I've got to keep my mind on my work." (985)

"I just want everybody to understand that I won't let my life interfere with my work."  
(988)

"I'm not going to let things like that interfere with my career either." (1095)

The anti-marriage position Margo expresses here, contrasted to women's passivity to personal griefs presented in the novel's early Newsreels: '*Poor little Hollywood Rose/[...]/how sad she's grown*' (1160), redefines Margo's role in society. The control she practices over her body echoes the authority Maisie and Gertrude initiate in *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* when they protect themselves from sexual promiscuity. Further, like West, who 'was neither committed to any single man nor to the idea of marriage' for personal release,<sup>104</sup> Margo is far from committing herself to any man while she works as an actress. 'Heaven won't protect a working girl', she tells Tad, 'unless she protects herself' (992). The sake of protecting her work as an actress helps her to violate assigned sex roles.

This idea of self-advancement through working empowers Margo to react violently against being sexually exploited. She once slaps her rapist Frank on the face when he attempts, a second time, to sexually abuse her:

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<sup>103</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 171-195 (p. 183).

<sup>104</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, 95-120 (p. 96).

Then suddenly he made a grab of her. She'd been expecting it and gave him a ringing slap on the face as she got to her feet. She felt herself getting hysterical as he came towards her across the room panting. (981)

Margo rejects Frank's molestation by slapping him, and also by threatening him: 'I caught a disease down there, if you don't keep away from me you'll catch it too' (981). Certainly more actively than Conroy's Helen, who vocally rejects Larry's passes by begging, "Go away and leave me alone," (*TD*, 198), Margo acts aggressively in this scene. Her violent resistance to Frank's passes echoes her blackening of Tony's eye immediately after he once 'beat her up' (974). The feminist historian Linda Gordon discusses the beatings that many wives suffered, suggesting that 'most of the women's violence was responsive or reactive'.<sup>105</sup> Gordon emphasises that women's beating of their partners occurred occasionally when they wanted to hold their own against a man whom they hated and yet with whom they were forced to live.<sup>106</sup> Margo reacts similarly to Tony's beating and Frank's attempts to sexually re-abuse her, thereby gaining a stronger self-identity and an authority over her body.

Dos Passos, as a modernist writer who often represents the same object from different angles, contradicts Margo's violence by presenting the generous aspect in her character. Horace Gregory identifies Margo and women from the previous *U.S.A.* volumes, Eveline Hutchins and Anne Elizabeth, as either 'typical' heroines or 'ironic portrait[s] of the "new woman"'.<sup>107</sup> 'The New Woman', the 'self-reliant' prototype of women, argues Walter B. Rideout in *The Radical Novel in the United States*, 'instinctively aligns herself with the movement for industrial democracy, as she seeks "emancipation and equality" for herself'.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston, 1880-1960* (New York: Viking, 1988), 250-288 (p. 274).

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>107</sup> Gregory, 'Dos Passos Completes his Modern Trilogy' 130-34 (p. 133).

<sup>108</sup> Rideout explains: 'If physically she [The New Woman] appears at first to be cold toward men, her emotional potentiality is shown by her deep, generous warmth toward ideals. Occasionally she comes from the proletariat, but more often from at least an upper-middle-class family, so that her manners are proper. Whatever her class of

In his Third Period novels and in *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos introduces 1920s New women as selfishly detaching themselves from the support of others. Ellen Thatcher in *Manhattan Transfer*, for example, chases her dream of becoming a Hollywood actress and never shows empathy towards her ex-husband, Jimmy, who is left behind in New York. As another example, Maisie in *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* burns up her husband's radical papers (42<sup>nd</sup>, 104). Margo, however, is not entirely socially indifferent. Despite being sexually and physically mistreated respectively by Frank and Tony, she helps them when they are unwell. She, for instance, chooses to nurse Frank at the moment of his sickness (*TBM*, 990; 1096). She also asks for financial support from her rich friend, Charley, to help Tony recover in the sanatorium from dope and exposure (1052). These incidents are indicative of Margo's generosity, for after becoming an actress like Ellen, she carries a responsibility towards her friends. Clara Juncker, analysing Margo's development into a Hollywood star, maintains that Margo 'is warm-hearted, generous, unselfish and likeable, despite and because of her shrewdness and her sex-appeal'.<sup>109</sup> In the same token, to use a description of West, Margo demonstrates that she is 'bighearted and generous, she helps people',<sup>110</sup> and these kind traits deepen her character. These arguments counter Horace Gregory's and Malcolm Cowley's suggestions that *U.S.A.*'s women are mere sexual objects with little or no social agency.<sup>111</sup>

Dos Passos also shows Margo as a strong-willed woman managing her financial affairs the way she likes without committing herself to married life. And in doing so, Margo reflects political tendencies. The scene which describes her relationship with the millionaire Charley Anderson reads:

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origin, she always awakens to self in proportion as she awakens to the promise of the new society'. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954*, 47-87 (pp. 74-5).

<sup>109</sup> Clara Juncker, 'Dos Passos' Movie Star: Hollywood Success and American Failure', *American Studies in Scandinavia* 22.1 (1990), 1-14 (p. 13).

<sup>110</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 323-49 (p. 340).

<sup>111</sup> Gregory, 'Dos Passos Completes His Modern Trilogy', 130-34 (p. 133); Cowley, 'The End of a Trilogy', 135-39 (p. 136).

She did let him play the stockmarket a little for her, and buy her clothes and jewelry and take her to Atlantic City and Long Beach weekends. He'd been an airplane pilot and decorated in the war and had big investments in airplane companies. (1042)

That Margo gets herself clothes and jewellery is representative of a larger concern in the 1930s about women's consumption. Susan Currell points out in her study of leisure that the government at that time, in order to help the country out of poverty, encouraged women's shopping yet in a guided way that brought women into the acceptance of their roles as wives and mothers.<sup>112</sup> The promotion of this leisure accordingly reconfigured traditional masculinist norms, yet, as Currell postulates, 'women's "irrational" spending could help to buy society out of the Depression by increasing the flow of products'.<sup>113</sup> In Dos Passos' novel, Margo disburses a large amount of Charley's money and through this relationship she adopts an anti-capitalist orientation, especially when not getting married to Charley. 'Destroying marriage', writes Marxist-feminist Christina Simmons, 'undermined capitalism'.<sup>114</sup> The female body in a marriage, Simmons explains, is objectified like the proletariat's subordination to the ruling class, and resisting this commodifying position can disrupt capitalist norms. Dos Passos' Margo, within the context of a financially rather than sexually exploitative relationship, makes Charley, who describes himself as 'a little devil with the women', control his desire and spend his money on her (1027). This friendship carries double meanings. First, it figures the proletariat's liberation from the ruling class' sovereignty, for this friendship does not evolve into a marriage. Second, it counteracts one person's, Charley's, possession of the big money, and Margo, flouting sexist expectations, is the first to use this capital.

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<sup>112</sup> Currell, *The March of Spare Time*, 111-124 (p. 116).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>114</sup> Christina Simmons, 'Power in Sex Radical Challenges to Marriage in the Early-Twentieth-Century United States', *Feminist Studies* 29.1 (2003), 169-98 (p. 179).

In *Capital* (1876), which Dos Passos had started to read on his trip to the Soviet Union in 1928,<sup>115</sup> Marx argues that the capitalist ‘person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which money sets out and the point to which it returns’.<sup>116</sup> Charley in *The Big Money*, to borrow Marxist terms, is no longer ‘the owner of money’, the ‘capitalist’,<sup>117</sup> on the occasions when Margo uses his money. Margo’s asking for Charley’s financial support for Tony exemplifies this position:

She came out with her sad story and he didn’t take it so well. He said he was hard up for cash [...] he could raise five hundred dollars for her but he’d have to pledge some securities to do that. (1051)

Margo here is a manipulating character with masked ambitions. She intends to benefit Tony by using a capitalist’s money, thus embodying one of the novel’s politicised messages: the promotion of the use of invested but unused capital to resist divides between the rich and the poor. In her relationship with Charley, Margo certainly appears like an actress in a movie scene. The following quotation describes this situation when she pays Charley a visit in the hospital, cajoling him to write a cheque for her:

Margo leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. Charley felt like he was in a glass case. There was the touch of her lips, the smell of her dress, her hair, the perfume she used, but he couldn’t feel them. Like a scene in a movie he watched her walk out, the sway of her hips under the tight dress, the little nervous way she was fluttering the check under her chin to dry the ink on it. (1083)

Charley here perceives the distance of Margo’s feelings, as if she is acting in one of her movies. Meanwhile, Margo offers Charley, to use Morris Dickstein’s phrase about the arts in the 1930s, an ‘alternate world’,<sup>118</sup> a world that slightly eradicates his capitalism.

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<sup>115</sup> See Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, 135-164 (pp.159-60).

<sup>116</sup> Marx, *Capital* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1930), p. 138.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>118</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, xiii-xxiii (p. xix).

According to Robert Forsythe, the actress Mae West, whom I argue is comparable to Margo in terms of generosity as well as in breaking with domestic conventions,<sup>119</sup> exemplifies and shows a moral decay within the bourgeoisie.<sup>120</sup> In his 1934 essay ‘Mae West: A Treatise on Decay’ for *New Masses*, Forsythe points out that in her acting on the stage West demonstrated ‘in her frank cynical way the depths to which capitalistic morality has come. There is an honesty in her playing which is even more devastating’.<sup>121</sup> Forsythe here criticises West’s acting due to its exhibition of immorality. One might say that this criticism by a left-wing critic germinates from West’s acting in scenes that disrupt neither capitalism nor the American dream. Leo Gurko, in discussing Dos Passos’ artistic talent when addressing proletarian themes in *U.S.A.*, suggests that Dos Passos presents the movies in his novels as a way of alluding to the American dream. ‘The movies’, Gurko writes, ‘like the stock market, are another of the illusion-making substitutes for the real thing—a process of displacement that is, in the author’s view, all too characteristic of the American scene’.<sup>122</sup> Through her work as an actress, Margo alludes to the American dream and, further, finds personal escape from gendered tensions.

Paula Rabinowitz points out that Hollywood movies from the 1930s often presented ““working girls” whose bodies were traded as show girls or as prostitutes to keep off the dole’.<sup>123</sup> Meanwhile, Michael Denning notes, classic leftist films, like *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin, offer a critique of industrial capitalism and the exploitation of the proletariat without highlighting women’s issues.<sup>124</sup> Margo, acting in a silent sketch which her lover Sam

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<sup>119</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 323-49 (p. 340); Ware, *Holding their Own*, 171-195 (p. 183).

<sup>120</sup> Forsythe, ‘Mae West: A Treatise on Decay’, p. 29.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>122</sup> Leo Gurko, ‘John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.*: A 1930’s Spectacular’, in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, ed. by David Madden (London: Southern Illinois UP, 1968), 46-63 (p. 55).

<sup>123</sup> Rabinowitz, ‘Margaret Bourke-White’s Red Coat; Or, Slumming in 1930s’, in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. by Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 187-207 (p. 201).

<sup>124</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 53-114 (pp. 91-2).



directs, notably performs the role of a middle-class lover rather than a passive working-class prostitute. Sam gives her the directions:

Margo darling, you faint, you let yourself go in his [actor Si's] arms. If his strong arm weren't there to catch you would fall to the ground [...] forget that I'm here and that the camera's here, you [Si] are alone together snatching a desperate moment, you are alone except for your two beating hearts, you and the most beautiful girl in the world, the nation's newest sweetheart. . . All right. . . hold it. . . Camera. (1126)

This acting as if really in love, which is confined to Sam's guidelines, matches the space of autonomy Dos Passos offers to Margo. Margo, moving away from the sexual exploitation she encounters early in the novel, gains in this silent and sensual sketch the freedom to become someone else with no real-world consequences and this suggests her autonomy within the art sphere.

Duncan, whose short biography Dos Passos places next to a prose segment on Margo, exemplified a similar emancipation, for she freed the female dancing body from clothing constraints.<sup>125</sup> Interestingly, while Margo finds freedom in film, Duncan found it confining. Duncan declined the offer to act in a Hollywood movie designed especially for her, and she explains to her biographer, Victor Seroff, that appearing in motion pictures meant that she would be 'entirely at the mercy of their script writers, directors, and producers.'<sup>126</sup> Penny Farfan contends in her study about female artists,

For Duncan, surrendering her image to the control of Hollywood movie-makers, who would recast her in their own mediated version of her and who would in the process empty her work of its significance, was the equivalence of transforming her

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<sup>125</sup> See Elizabeth Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words: Feminism and Modernism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1-38 (p. 6).

<sup>126</sup> Seroff, *The Real Isadora*, 44-55 (p. 47).

choreography [...] into meaningless movements beyond her power to control.<sup>127</sup>

In contrast, Margo, who is not a dancer like Duncan and who is a silent actress in the previously quoted sketch, finds silent acting a means to challenge gender and class constraints she has previously experienced.

Douglas Tallack touches on the silence of actors in Hollywood movies of the 1920s and 1930s. Discussing the silent film *Modern Times*, directed and screened in the same year *The Big Money* was published, Tallack argues that ‘Sound was not, and is not, in itself either a liberating or a repressive technology but its management by Hollywood’s mode of production turned it in the direction of a certain kind of “realism” [...] a utopia or representation’.<sup>128</sup> The occasional presence of characters’ sound in a silent movie like *Modern Times*, Tallack maintains, is a modernist feature used to criticise ‘the authorial “voice” of the nineteenth-century realist novel’.<sup>129</sup> Sound’s inclusion or exclusion from a movie in this period can signify, much like the repetition of specific sketches,<sup>130</sup> political meanings. In *The Big Money*, Margo acts in a silent movie, and by means of this role Dos Passos shows Margo as going further than Duncan, the dancer who rejects silent acting and whose feminist attitudes the novelist downplays in his sketch of her.

Although she does not perform through dance, like Duncan, Margo enters the arena wherein performers signify social messages through their displayed actions. In a manner similar to Harriett in *Not Without Laughter*, whose carnival dancing and singing of the blues mask political meanings as suggested in Chapter One, Margo fulfils Duncan’s progressive mission via silent acting. Drawing on Ann Daly’s analysis of Duncan’s dancing, one might

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<sup>127</sup> Farfan continues: ‘This denial of her power to be a performing subject – to be a dancer who also speaks – is precisely the effect of her co-operation into narratives of tragedy’ (*Women, Modernism and Performance*, pp. 112-13).

<sup>128</sup> Douglas Tallack, *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context* (London: Longman, 1991), 37-77 (p. 52).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>130</sup> Tallack argues that the repetition of certain scenes in the movie *Modern Times* ‘structures but also un-structures the narrative’ (p. 48).

say that Margo's acting 'was now about the self's inner impulses made manifest through the rhythmic, dynamic expression of the whole body'.<sup>131</sup> Margo translates Duncan's feminist view,<sup>132</sup> which Dos Passos' novel presents in different ways, into actions, since she obtains a degree of autonomy through her acting. Guided by her director, Margo acts as a bourgeois lover on the screen. However, she breaks away from typical proletarian girls' encounters of rape, which she herself had faced before she became an actress. Becoming an actress who performs love on screen, Margo comforts herself, her director and potentially her audience. In the novel, Margo advances her life by living and working like an actress, and she reflects the American dream as well as hidden political inclinations. This reflection indicates how Dos Passos tries to emancipate his central narrative women from gendered expectations.

### **Mary French, a Mother to the Working Class**

Margo, the self-directed 1920s New Woman who raises her class status and helps her friends despite their sexist treatment of her, advances the ideas which Dos Passos introduces in the peripheral modes about women's lack of autonomy and the different layers of their social activity. Margo's improved personal autonomy and its potential influence on her audiences is a means by which to create another world for herself and those audiences. However, her message is notably different from that of the Communist Party during the 1920s and early 1930s. At this time, the Communist Party called for working-class activism, and because the priority was solving the proletariat's struggles, the Communist Party often overlooked women's issues.<sup>133</sup> Dos Passos' character Mary French, who ultimately works with fictionalised Communist Party men, takes radical female representation further than Margo and the novel's other female characters. Mary steps out of the middle class by educating

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<sup>131</sup> Daly, 'Dance History and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze', 239-259 (pp. 254-5).

<sup>132</sup> See Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words*, pp. 1-6.

<sup>133</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 3-50 (p. 32).

herself about the working class; working as a journalist who is sympathetic towards the proletarians; organising meetings for radicals; repressing her frustration against her comrades' gendered expectations or sexual exploitation; having an abortion in order to pursue her work for the proletariat; and finally joining a picket line and working for the Sacco-Vanzetti trial. Ultimately, she becomes a figurative mother to proletarians, and therefore mobilises the novel's less politicised portrayals of women.

Dos Passos claimed in a 1929 review of Mike Gold's novel *120 Million* that '[a] writer is after all a machine for absorbing and arranging certain sequences of words out of the lives of the people around him'.<sup>134</sup> The *U.S.A.* trilogy absorbs factual elements and, further, relates them to fictionalised scenes, as previous literary critics have noted. Jun Young Lee maintains that in *U.S.A.*'s third-person narratives, Dos Passos describes his 'thoughts' about his characters like a reporter.<sup>135</sup> '[T]he reader', Lee writes, 'may have the impression of reading newspaper articles. In this sense, the lives that Dos Passos portrays in the trilogy are essentially remembered lives'.<sup>136</sup> David Minter looks at several proletarian novels from the 1930s, and similarly remarks that 'Historical figures interact with fictional characters, blurring the line between history and fiction - and with it, the line between documentary reports and imaginative stories'.<sup>137</sup> In this regard, the character Mary French's work for the helpless resembles the commitment undertaken by women on the left from the period. Examples of these women, who were Dos Passos' contemporaries, are writers and reporters Mary Heaton Vorse, Josephine Herbst and Meridel Le Sueur and Communist Party women like Mother Ella Bloor and Peggy Dennis – women who dedicated themselves to class

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<sup>134</sup> Dos Passos, 'The Making of a Writer', in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. by Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988), 116-117 (p. 117).

<sup>135</sup> Lee, *History and Utopian Disillusion*, 149-194 (p. 187).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>137</sup> David Minter, *A Cultural History of the American Novel: Henry James to William Faulkner* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 160-66 (p. 166).

concerns since they worked in spheres established primarily to solve proletarian struggles.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, Mary French, although her comrades treat her in a sexist way, pursues social work for people of a class lower than her own. Therefore, as this section maintains, she is more active than Margo, whose generosity is bounded by her personal relationships.

A 1937 review of the *U.S.A.* trilogy by Mason Wade affirms that in his depiction of America, Dos Passos 'does not wrap the facts as he sees them to conform to a party line or an ideological doctrine'; the novelist, rather, is 'a reporter, not an editorializer, so he shows and does not preach except by parable'.<sup>139</sup> Wade attributes this form of presentation to the fact that the novelist is 'a natural reporter' who is 'both romanticist and realist'.<sup>140</sup> *The Big Money* appeared at the onset of the Popular Front cultural movement, and the attempt to report proletarian struggles becomes crucial. Denning emphasises:

By the mid 1930s, the cultural front was sustained by a movement culture, a world of working-class education, recreation, and entertainment built by the Communist Party [...] In this world, the proletarian artists found an enthusiastic and sympathetic audience, one for whom their works and performances became emblems of solidarity and self-affirmation.<sup>141</sup>

The Popular Front's intellectuals, whether or not from the proletariat, strove to address working-class struggles and eschew capitalist assumptions that reinforced the proletariat's marginality in order to meet leftist audiences' expectations, and this focus often marginalises women's issues.<sup>142</sup> Denning affirms that this Popular Front movement has been criticised for its 'sexual politics' and 'the gender unconscious of its culture'.<sup>143</sup> Dos Passos, no longer a member of the Communist Party, which adopted the Popular Front mode after 1935, refutes

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<sup>138</sup> See Ware, *Holding their Own*, 141-170; 118; Brown, 'The "Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World" of the Communist Party, U.S.A.: Feminism, Maternalism', and 'Mother Bloor', pp. 537-70.

<sup>139</sup> Wade, 'Novelist of America: John Dos Passos', p. 364; 367.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>141</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 53-114 (p. 67).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-50 (p. 32).

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-160 (p. 136).

gendered politics in *The Big Money*, especially in the narrative on Mary French. Despite experiencing sexism, Mary attempts to solve working-class problems, thus indicating Dos Passos' deviation from the leftist 'gender unconscious' of elevating proletarian struggles without raising women's issues or thinking about their political activity.<sup>144</sup>

Initially, by spending leisure time in reading and re-reading novels and theoretical books concerned with social issues Mary equips herself with knowledge of social activism. This act of reading, which takes place whenever Mary is alone in her father's house, awakens an association between herself and the socialists about whom she reads. The fact that Mary chooses to spend her leisure time reading about social issues is representative of a larger movement in the 1930s which promoted using leisure time to address social problems. A 1935 study called *Home and Family* proclaims, 'Tell me how the people of a nation organize their leisure time and I will tell you the destiny of that nation'.<sup>145</sup> Cultural historian Susan Currell maintains that in 1930s America leisure cultural activities like reading and writing both problematise and contribute to the solving of social struggles.<sup>146</sup> Reading socially-conscious books within this context can function similarly, and Mary's narrative suggests this. For example, when she reads Ernest Poole's *The Harbor* (1915) and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), two socially-conscious novels, Mary has the idea that 'if she sacrificed her life, like Daddy taking care of his patients night and day, maybe she, like Miss Addams...' (865). The thought is incomplete here, yet it suggests how excited Mary is when

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<sup>144</sup> Women intellectuals (Tillie Lerner Olsen, Hope Hale, Ruth McKenney and Vera Caspary), influenced by this leftist culture, have contributed to the 'laboring' of this Popular Front culture without explicitly addressing women's issues, like abortion or birth control, or overweighing the woman's capacity in leading a change in the society. Olsen, Denning exemplifies, was '[i]mmmediately recognized as one of the most powerful voices of the proletarian movement' after publishing a proletarian story in the *Partisan Review* which manifested her activist social views (67). Hale, McKenney and Caspary, who were 'entangled directly in the culture of fashion and romance', likewise have 'attempted to reconcile their commercial writing with their political affiliation' (*The Cultural Front*, p. 141).

<sup>145</sup> Helen Mougey Jordan, M. Louisa Ziller and John Franklin Brown, *Home and Family* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), pp. 188-9. See Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Service, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), p. 33.

<sup>146</sup> Currell, *The March of Spare Time*, 1-11 (p. 2).

considering sacrificing her life for others' survival. Like the historical Jane Addams, who prioritised public over domestic concerns and devoted her life 'to causes larger than the individual family',<sup>147</sup> Mary presumably wants to become a social activist. After reading the above texts and starting her degree study in sociology, Mary helps her father, a physician who treats sick miners, make appointments for his patients. Mary's situation is not unlike that of Conroy's Bonny, who also pursues education and later helps with the farm when her family's finances are strained. The leisure time which Mary spends reading about activists like Addams helps her formulate proletarian inclinations, and foreshadows the socialist work she later undertakes.

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which was first published in 1899 and which Mary reads after working with her father, Thorstein Veblen writes about the 'new' woman's efficiency in causing societal progress. Martha Banta, in an editorial note about this volume, mentions that Veblen has 'placed his faith' in 'the New Woman', the woman who 'valued efficiency and peace in defiance of the male penchant for waste and conflict'.<sup>148</sup> Veblen criticises the 'leisure' class, and maintains:

The grievance of the new woman is made up of those things which this typical characterisation of the movement urges as reasons why she should be content. She is petted, and is permitted, or even required, to consume largely and conspicuously—vicariously for her husband or other natural guardian. She is exempted, or debarred, from vulgarly useful employment – in order to perform leisure vicariously for the good repute of her natural (pecuniary) guardian [...] But the woman is endowed with her share – which there is reason to believe is more than an even share – of the instinct of workmanship, to which futility of life or of expenditure is obnoxious. She must unfold

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<sup>147</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 285-302 (p. 285); Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 115-142 (p. 140).

<sup>148</sup> Banta, ed., 'Introduction', *Oxford World's Classics*, 8-19 (p. 15).

her life activity in response to the direct, unmediated stimuli of the economic environment with which she is in contact.<sup>149</sup>

As John Diggins argues, Veblen's analysis suggests that he, much like his contemporary Charlotte Perkins Gilman, attributed to women 'the qualities of cooperation and serviceability'.<sup>150</sup> Far from limiting these qualities to the confines of the household, however, Veblen 'wanted to see women participate in the move to take control of the productive process of economic life'.<sup>151</sup> Dos Passos' Mary puts into practice some of Veblen's ideas. Unlike Bonny, who directly recites Vachel Lindsay's verse 'Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly' from 'The Leaden-Eyed' (*TD*, 243), Mary's ideas about Veblen's book are more subtly presented. Her reading of Veblen's volume suggests that she rejects classism and develops the courage to put what she reads into action. More than a late nineteenth-century New Woman, the 'excessively self-sacrificing' woman about whom Veblen theorises,<sup>152</sup> Mary is a character who turns Veblen's belief in women's 'purposeful activity' into action.<sup>153</sup>

In the novel, a biographical segment on Veblen's life, placed next to a section on Mary, introduces Veblen as a theorist who 'suffered from woman trouble [...] and an unnatural tendency to feel with the working class instead of with the profittakers' (851). Dos Passos notably does not discuss Veblen's argument about the New Woman in this sketch. However, this exclusion, comparable to his omission of Duncan's feminist ideas, suggests a tendency towards establishing a fully developed 'new' woman, potentially in the form of Mary. Feminist historians distinguish between two kinds of 'New' women: 'By the early twentieth century it was a commonplace that the New Woman stood for self-development as

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<sup>149</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994), 203-221 (p. 218).

<sup>150</sup> John Diggins, *Thorstein Veblen: Theorist of Leisure Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 156-9 (p. 158).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>152</sup> Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 45-91 (p. 58).

<sup>153</sup> Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 203-221 (p. 218).



contrasted to self-sacrifice or service to the family'.<sup>154</sup> The New Woman of the 1920s obviously did 'work for a living', 'attempt to be truly self-sufficient' and 'enjoy sexual affairs without committing themselves to marriage'.<sup>155</sup> Mary is neither a self-advancing 1920s New Woman like Margo, nor a self-sacrificing late nineteenth-century conventional woman, of the type that Veblen admires. Rather, she becomes a synthesis of the two, for she advances her life unselfishly and dedicates her efforts to the working class.

Mary exhibits this combination of personal advancement and political engagement when she works in numerous proletarian spheres. She works as a reporter who is sympathetic towards workers and strikers, a cafeteria counter girl, a worker in a ladies' clothing department, a researcher for the International Ladies' Garment Workers, and as a protester with Communist Party men. And, by the end of the novel, she plans to be the secretary for the miners' committee in Pittsburgh as well as working on the Sacco-Vanzetti case in Boston.<sup>156</sup> While it becomes increasingly politicised, Mary's work continues to involve forms of labour that, like the ones announced in Newsreel LI which closes with the statement 'WE HAVE HUNDREDS OF POSITIONS OPEN' (855), were often occupied by women in the early twentieth century.<sup>157</sup> As Lois Scharf affirms in her study about American women's positions in the 1930s, work in clerical jobs and social services 'fell within the division labeled "Ladies First"'.<sup>158</sup> The passing from one work to another within this gendered circle, as Mary does on a voluntary basis, by no means suggests a confinement to these jobs, which is implied in the novel's Newsreels. It reflects, rather, an obsession with widening 'mental horizon[s]', in sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin's terms.<sup>159</sup> The person 'who passes from occupation to occupation, from poverty to riches, from subordination to domination, and *vice versa*',

<sup>154</sup> Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 13-50 (p. 39).

<sup>155</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 285-302 (p. 290).

<sup>156</sup> *The Big Money*, pp. 876-7; 880; 1137; 1237.

<sup>157</sup> See Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 1-9 (p. 4).

<sup>158</sup> Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 86-109 (p. 101).

<sup>159</sup> Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Mobility* (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1959), 508-29 (p. 509).

Sorokin emphasises in his 1927 cultural study, is 'experiencing different standards, habits, morals, ideas, customs, and beliefs'.<sup>160</sup> Dos Passos' Mary passes through a similar experience by abandoning her inherited social position and getting herself un-paid jobs associated with the working class.

While enthusiastically performing these social services, Mary encounters sexist expectations from which she withdraws herself. When she collects data about the strikers in order to know more about their 'real' lives, for instance, Dos Passos writes that Mary 'liked the long hours digging out statistics, the talk with the organizers, the wisecracking radicals [...] At last she felt what she was doing was real' (1137). Ironically, she gets the privilege of reporting because of her appearance. The fictionalised newspaper owner Ted Healy, who offers her a job as a storywriter for the *Time-Sentinel*, explains to her, 'I don't want a dead reporter on my front page. . . But sending you down [...] A sweet innocent looking girl can't possibly come to any harm' (878). Ted wants Mary to find out for the paper about the strikers' relationship to Russian radicals. Mary, who was shown 'ragged kids making mudpies' and 'the photograph of the dead woman with her head caved in' before she reports on the story, however, writes a story that Ted criticises as 'a first-rate propaganda piece for the *Nation* or some other parlorpink sheet in New York' (881-2). By not meeting Ted's instructions and his expectations, Mary associates herself with leftist reporting commitments.

Mary, in fact, is comparable to Mary Heaton Vorse, a journalist friend of Dos Passos, who wrote about the Gastonia strike in her proletarian novel *Strike!*, and to which she added 'her own embellishments'.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, Vorse had written radical essays in magazines like the *Nation* and the *New Republic*,<sup>162</sup> and she found in this work a partial release from her

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 509. Italics in original.

<sup>161</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 398-442 (p. 407).

<sup>162</sup> See Ware, *Holding their Own*, 141-170 (p. 156).

domestic role as a single mother.<sup>163</sup> Meanwhile, as her biographer Dee Garrison maintains, Vorse ‘had instinctively used her feminine skills to enchant or manipulate in aid of her search for a story’.<sup>164</sup> Dos Passos’ Mary, however, whose portrayal Garrison and Denning compare to Vorse’s social and political activism,<sup>165</sup> manages to write her story as objectively as possible. Whereas the agency of Mary’s literary counterpart in Conroy’s novel, Bonny Fern, is limited to pointing Larry towards a radical magazine which inspires him to turn its ideas into revolutionary actions, Mary becomes a journalist and writes about proletariat people. And this propels Mary into the kind of political agency Dos Passos wants to see.

The ‘*visual* encounters’, to borrow Paula Rabinowitz’s term when explaining middle-class photographer Margaret Bourke-White’s engagement with the proletariat,<sup>166</sup> between Mary and the workers invigorate her to act for the proletariat’s benefit instead of using her middle-class status as a privilege to observe as an outsider. After seeing strikers in person and their families in pictures, Mary feels sympathetic towards their position. She witnesses what Michael Denning calls ‘the proletarian sublime [...] the aesthetic awe and fear provoked by the emergence of a class of despised laborers, a social Other’.<sup>167</sup> By viewing the other class through awe and fear, Mary succeeds in entering into ‘the lower depths’.<sup>168</sup> This ‘sublime’ experience triggers her attempt to represent proletarian struggles accurately, although the temptation to sentimentalise her represented subjects is a risk. William Stott points out that in the 1930s, the age of documentary writings, bourgeois writers, journalists, and artists often

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<sup>163</sup> Coles and Zandy, eds., ‘Mary Heaton Vorse’, *American Working-Class Literature*, 377-80 (p. 377).

<sup>164</sup> Dee Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989), 275-297 (p. 296).

<sup>165</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 163-199 (p. 175); Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>166</sup> Paula Rabinowitz maintains that the moving into the working class, the crossings into ‘slumming’, ‘occur tellingly at moments of *visual* encounters between those whose lives were privileged to observe, regulate, and detail the behaviors of others – journalists, novelists, photographers, and social workers – and their subjects, usually, in the depression decade, the poor’. Rabinowitz, ‘Margaret Bourke-White’s Red Coat; Or, Slumming in 1930s’, 187-207 (p. 188). Italics in original.

<sup>167</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 163-199 (p. 194).

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

present facts that ‘sentimentalize’ their presented objects, the proletarians.<sup>169</sup> Sympathetic ‘presentation or representation’ of realities about the marginalised class, Stott affirms, triggers readers’ ‘feeling’ before their ‘intellect’.<sup>170</sup> Like documentary photographs, they are a step away from the actual presentation, and henceforth they are ‘to some extent biased communication’.<sup>171</sup> Although these presentations might carry some bias, the lack of objectivity in Mary’s writing about strikers does not extinguish her proletarian agency – her passion for knowing more about these people’s real struggles.

A biographical vignette about William Randolph Hearst, a newspaper owner, comes straight after a narrative segment on Mary, and through this placement Dos Passos directs readers to make a contrast between Mary’s closeness to working-class realities to that of newspaper owners like Hearst. The vignette about Hearst states: ‘Newspapermen saw heard ate drank touched horsed kidded rubbed shoulders with real men, whored; that was life’, indicating Hearst’s distance from proletarian realities (1163). Not unlike Ted, the fictionalised newspaper owner, Hearst possessed one of New York’s largest newspapers, the *Daily Mirror*, and his newspaper did not accurately present the reality of the working class.<sup>172</sup> The modern ads which appeared in inter-war newspapers like Hearst’s, Roland Marchand explains, ‘dramatized the American dream’ through portraying images that are not representative of reality.<sup>173</sup> In Hearst’s *Daily Mirror*, as an example of the tabloid newspaper, ‘photographs dominated the news presentation’ in order to address ‘the average mind’, and Marchand sees this newspaper’s mostly wordless design as a distancing from the real.<sup>174</sup> Certainly, Hearst was regarded by the Popular Front left as ‘an emblem of American fascism,

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<sup>169</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 46-64 (p. 57).

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8; 14.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>172</sup> Dos Passos, who was tempted by crossing into the working-class, criticises Hearst as a “slummer” who tries to comprehend the proletarian struggles (Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 198).

<sup>173</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, p. xviii. See also page 48.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

a powerful capitalist who was also a visible demagogue [...] and his newspapers were rabidly anti-labor'.<sup>175</sup> And, Dos Passos' sketch on Hearst introduces this man as political 'rat poison' in spite of his popularity as 'the greatest newspaper owner in the country' (1167). Mary, by contrast, writes about the proletarians after encountering them face-to-face, and her character conveys the importance of presenting authenticity in reportage and documentary. Rabinowitz examines 1930s projects that combine journalistic vignettes and photographs, and argues that these works are an 'attempt' to show realism, since their producers have observed yet not lived the suffering of the proletariat.<sup>176</sup> Mary's journalistic writing about the strikers and the poor might function like an 'attempt' to reflect the proletariat's reality. And, this experience, seeking closeness to proletarians, exceeds what Hearst's tabloid newspaper fails to achieve, a contrast Dos Passos suggests by placing the segment on Hearst's life next to the prose on Mary's journalistic work.

Josephine Herbst, a friend of Dos Passos and a radical journalist born into a poor family, had also worked to present the reality of the poor and the strikers when she wrote for *New Masses*,<sup>177</sup> to which Dos Passos contributed. The magazine was created, its editor Mike Gold proclaimed, to speak for 'the lowbrow, the failure, the rebel, the boy worker, the factory poet, the tenant farmer, the poorhouse philosopher, the men and the women at the bottom'.<sup>178</sup> In her reports for this magazine, designed to address proletarian issues to be solved by radical men, Herbst covered mining, striking, and agrarian plights, and called for improving these circumstances.<sup>179</sup> Through these reporting projects, Herbst introduced herself to the political arena wherein she expressed her view about what she experienced and observed as a woman

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<sup>175</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 362-402 (p. 385).

<sup>176</sup> Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 35-55 (p. 36; 40).

<sup>177</sup> See Ware, *Holding their Own*, 78-80; 155.

<sup>178</sup> qtd., in Tadie, 'The Masses Speak', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 832-56 (p. 847).

<sup>179</sup> Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, 19-46 (pp. 30-1); Ware, *Holding their Own*, p. 155.

from the proletariat.<sup>180</sup> While Mary never writes in a similar fictionalised magazine, her reporting on strikers distances her from both her middle-class background and the conventions of feminine appearance:

[H]er clothes were in awful shape, there was no curl in her hair, at night she couldn't sleep for the memory of the things she'd seen, the jailings, the bloody heads, the wreck of some family's parlor [...] She hardly knew herself when she looked at her face in the greenspotted giltframed mirror over the washstand as she hurriedly dressed in the morning. She had a haggard desperate look. She was beginning to look like a striker herself. (883)

That Mary does not know herself when looking in the mirror suggests that her image has become a mimetic reflection of the people about whom she worries. When a woman surveys her appearance in the mirror, John Berger states in *Ways of Seeing*, 'she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight'.<sup>181</sup> Mary turns herself into an object for her own sight, and her physical appearance is like a masculine proletariat figure. The consequence of her journalistic work, like that of Herbst's for *New Masses*, propels her both symbolically and literally into the arena of proletarian activity, for she looks like a striker after dedicating so much effort to reporting on strikers' conditions.

This experience of Mary propelling herself in to the proletariat could be compared to the writing of Meridel Le Sueur, the middle-class transgressor who was jailed in 1927 as a consequence of her protest against anarchists Sacco's and Vanzetti's executions,<sup>182</sup> about a middle-class woman's ultimate engagement with a strike. In the short story 'I Was Marching' (1934), written for *New Masses*, which was funded by Communist Party supporters, Le Sueur recounts:

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<sup>180</sup> Nekola, 'Political Women Journalists and the 1930s', in *Writing Red*, 189-98 (p. 193; 195).

<sup>181</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 47.

<sup>182</sup> Prairie Miller, 'Meridel Le Sueur', in *Encyclopaedia of the American Left*, pp. 420-1.

The truth is I was afraid. Not of the physical danger at all, but an awful fright of mixing, of losing myself, of being unknown and lost. I felt inferior. I felt no one would know me there, that all I had been trained to excel in would go unnoticed. I can't describe what I felt, but perhaps it will come near it to say that I felt I excelled in competing with others and I knew instantly that these people were NOT competing at all, that they were acting in a strange, powerful trance of movement *together*.<sup>183</sup>

Mary, who eventually works to try to save the lives of Sacco and Vanzetti, and who we are told is 'beginning to look like a striker herself', shares this sublime experience of fear, sympathy, and amalgamation with proletarians. Mary realises that strikers, despite their horrible life experiences, work 'together' for collective rather than individualised objectives, and this recognition diminishes the importance in her mind of feminine concerns like curling her hair and thinking of 'what dress to wear' (874). Not unlike Le Sueur's narrator's mixed feelings about joining a working-class march, Mary aligns herself with the strikers, and her proletarian thoughts emerge when she converts her personal plans into collective ones.

The militant activities with which Mary engages exemplify her assimilation to the masculine working-class sphere. In a scene that takes place late in the novel, Mary joins a protest parade in Charlestown with her communist comrade Don Stevens. While she is protesting, a policeman catches her and cracks her on the hands with a club. Robert Cantwell portrays a similar scene in his 1934 proletarian novel, *The Land of Plenty*. In Cantwell's text, the female protagonist, Ellen, joins a picket line and eventually a cop holds her by the novel's close.<sup>184</sup> Mary carries deeper politicised intentions, for after being clubbed by the police she 'caught herself thinking that she ought to have her hair bobbed if she was going to do much of this sort of thing' (1155). A woman having her hair cut during the 1920s signified a break

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<sup>183</sup> Le Sueur, 'I Was Marching', *New Masses* (1934), 16-18 (p. 16).

<sup>184</sup> See Robert Cantwell, *The Land of Plenty* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1962), p. 309; p. 367. The novel's narrator comments that when Ellen was held by the cop, Johnny 'could see it clearly, the pain and horror on Ellen's face, the calm absorption of the cop as he brought the club down methodically on her head and shoulders, and the stunned silence of the watchers' (368).

from nineteenth-century Victorian images of ‘femininity’.<sup>185</sup> Furthermore, bobbing the hair in addition to wearing make-up and comfortable clothing were features of ‘flappers’, women who wanted to assert their sexual independence.<sup>186</sup> However, Mary’s reasons for getting her hair cut suggest an obvious deviation from the motives of other women. This scene suggests Mary’s inclinations towards taking her task more seriously while protesting with male radicals, and this engagement buries her earlier more ‘feminine’ preoccupations.

The fictionalised communist comrades, George Barrow, Ben Compton and Don, however, treat Mary as a sexual target, which results in Mary becoming pregnant. This status of Mary as a pregnant woman, who attempts not to confuse her political work with an attractive appearance or with sexual relationships, highlights the gendered constrictions placed over women like her. The twentieth century’s first three decades witnessed a tendency by political women, such as Peggy Dennis and Margaret Sanger, to relate women’s matters (like abortion and contraception) and sexual emancipation to the struggles of the working class, but these issues were by no means the leftist party’s main focus.<sup>187</sup> While ‘many’ women worked with the Communist Party in the 1920s and 30s, most of them ‘felt they were not treated as equals by their male comrades’.<sup>188</sup> The ‘woman question’ for the Communist Party in the 1920s, Kate Weigand highlights, ‘was minimal and tokenistic compared with their attention to the “ethnic question” and the “Negro question”’.<sup>189</sup> Mari Jo Buhle delivers a similar argument concerning women’s positions in the Communist Party in the conclusion of her study, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920*:

Even in the mid-1930s, when the Communist party successfully broadened its program to include ‘mass work’ among women, leaders draw no observable lessons from the

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<sup>185</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 285-302 (p. 293).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., pp. 292-3.

<sup>187</sup> See Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, pp. 272-84.

<sup>188</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 117-140 (p. 120).

<sup>189</sup> Weigand, *Red Feminism*, pp. 15-16.



agitations conducted earlier by Socialists [...] Rarely did any leader convene a public discussion of discrimination within the party ranks, and never did the woman question become a major issue.<sup>190</sup>

Female Communist Party members were treated in that context as either helpmates or sexual partners, and this stance explains Mary's encounter of similar situations during her work with her socialist comrades.

In spite of these gendered tensions, Mary terminates two pregnancies and resists the confines of domesticity so that she can continue to work with Communist men for proletarian purposes. More specifically, she undergoes an operation to abort the infant she conceived with Ben, who encourages the abortion and sees in Mary the model of a loving 'Comrade' and wife (1140). In an earlier scene, when Mary finds herself unexpectedly pregnant by George,

She couldn't wait. She didn't know any doctor she could go to. Late one night she went into the kitchenette to stick her head in the oven and tried to turn on the gas, but it seemed so inconvenient somehow. (891)

While the quotation suggests that Mary has attempted suicide, Mary here physically attempts to abort this pregnancy. She tells her friend Ada 'to lend her the money to have the abortion [...] "I won't have a baby. I won't have a baby," Mary was muttering' (891). Mary's determination to have abortion signals her resistance to becoming a mother, seeking to pursue her social work for the proletariat without being interrupted with the mother's duties.

This episode obviously reflects the position of women in the historical Communist Party wherein women's issues were not prioritised.<sup>191</sup> It was not until the late 1930s, Weigand points out, that the Communist Party supported abortion and birth control as well as

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<sup>190</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 318-327 (pp. 322-3).

<sup>191</sup> Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 15-27 (15-16).

encouraging women ‘to challenge male domination in the workplace’.<sup>192</sup> Susan Ware discusses the fact that female Communist Party members like Dennis ‘underwent several abortions’ in order to devote most of their time to the Communist Party, and points out that the Communist Party rarely brought women’s issues to the fore at that time.<sup>193</sup> In Dos Passos’ text, Mary’s abortion, which the fictionalised Communist Party does not directly support, redeems Mary from a maternal role yet not from political commitment. Ben later, after his expulsion from the Communist Party, regrets the decision to terminate Mary’s pregnancy, but this experience elevates Mary’s amalgamation with radicals and establishes her liberty from maternity. To Mary, as it was for Dennis, the Communist Party’s work should not be interrupted by having a baby. And this work for a party that took a controversial stance on women – promoting abortions to allow women to continue working for the Communist Party, but without addressing women’s struggles from sexual exploitation or double burden – ironically helps Mary prioritise collective commitments over domestic and individualised matters.

There is an interesting similarity here with Agnes Smedley’s 1929 proletarian novel *Daughter of Earth*, whose female protagonist, Marie Rogers, devotes her life to the Socialist Party despite her struggles as a woman from the working class. Like Smedley’s Marie, Dos Passos’ Mary ignores her maternal feelings when she attempts to abort her child herself and later has an abortion at a clinic, deciding, “I won’t have a baby” (891). Once she goes into surgery, Mary’s status also corresponds to the proletarian intellectual Tess Slesinger’s standpoint about abortion, which is overviewed in the short story ‘Missis Flinders’, and later referred to in a chapter in her novel *The Unpossessed* (1934). Slesinger writes that she had gone through an abortion which she initially praises as an option for women, but changes her view once she experiences one. The literary critic Joy Castro maintains that abortion, as

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>193</sup> Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 117-140 (p. 124).

represented in 1930s American novels by leftist women writers like Slesinger, emulates women's subordination to the nature of pregnancy and to their husband's command of having an abortion if they suggest. Whether or not husbands demand the abortion, Castro argues, women are subject to 'physical pain and emotional devastation'.<sup>194</sup> Dos Passos' novel uncovers similar sexist tensions in the context of proletarian problems, yet Mary's personal feelings towards her abortions are barely shown, and when they are, they are hardly discussed in any depth. For instance, it is Ben rather than Mary who 'said they had to sacrifice their personal feelings for the workingclass [...] In the end she had an abortion' (1144). Dos Passos here highlights what he believes to be a problem with the Communist Party's treatment of women on the left at that time, and Mary becomes the novelist's entry point for talking about how women, like Mary, having an abortion repress their emotional responses for further political commitments.

One of Mary's deepest commitments to left-wing politics comes shortly after her abortion when she travels to Boston to work on Sacco and Vanzetti's trial case:

She threw herself into her work for the strike committee harder than ever. Sometimes for weeks she only slept four or five hours at night. She took to smoking a great deal.  
(1144)

Mary also exhibits her worries about finding justice for Sacco and Vanzetti by declaring to newspaperman Jerry Burnham: 'If the State of Massachusetts kill those two innocent men in the face of the protest of the whole world it'll mean there never will be any justice in America ever again' (1147). Mary here voices Dos Passos' own condemnation of these two men's execution, which the novelist also regarded to be an injustice. In 1927, the year in which Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, in *New Masses* Dos Passos wrote 'They Are Dead

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<sup>194</sup> Joy Castro, "'My Little Illegality': Abortion, Resistance, and Women Writers on the Left', in *The Novel and the American Left*, 16-34 (p. 17).

Now'.<sup>195</sup> The poem, which *New Masses* reprinted in 1936, the year of *The Big Money*'s publication, states:

The warden strapped these men into the electric chair  
  
the executioner threw the switch  
  
and set them free into the wind  
  
they are free of dreams now  
  
free of greasy prison denim  
  
their voices blow back in a thousand lingoos singing  
  
one song  
  
to burst the eardrums of Massachusetts.

Make a poem of that if you dare!<sup>196</sup>

Dos Passos' position here, which *New Masses* re-presents even though Dos Passos was not a Communist Party member by the mid-1930s, is not unlike Hughes' explicit leftist standpoint in his play *Scottsboro, Limited*, which also appeared in *New Masses*, towards the execution of the nine African-American boys accused of raping two white women in Alabama.<sup>197</sup> Dos Passos' choice not to include the above poem in *The Big Money* is significant. He presents his views on the case through Mary who supports Sacco and Vanzetti by actually trying to save their lives by joining strike committees. Mary, rather than writing a poem about this injustice, bolsters her affinity with radicals by throwing herself into the case.

Undoubtedly, Mary's actions are more direct than those of Margo, who obliquely

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<sup>195</sup> See Dos Passos 'They are Dead Now', *New Masses* 3.6 (October 1927), p. 7.

<sup>196</sup> Dos Passos, 'They Are Dead Now', p. 7.

<sup>197</sup> Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited*, 116-129 (pp. 128-9).

makes Charley spend his money on her for masked objectives that he does not comprehend. Mary, instead, asks her bourgeois mother outright for financial support in order to help Ben lead a strike, to finance Sacco-Vanzetti committee work, and to raise funds for the miners' children's milk (1143; 1148; 1125). On these occasions, Mary places herself in two lives – that of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat – to obviously help the latter. In the 1930s and the two preceding decades, Mother Bloor, also from a middle-class background, sided with the strikers, and this alliance encouraged her Communist partners to call her 'Mother' while she referred to them as her 'family'.<sup>198</sup> Bloor turned this political 'maternalism' into actions when she 'raise[ed] money for strike relief, and create[ed] community support for strikes and consumer actions'.<sup>199</sup> Bloor, who involved herself in striking activities, had protested, like Dos Passos and the fictionalised Mary, against Sacco's and Vanzetti's executions, and further, once the Depression hit, organised and 'initiated hunger marches among the unemployed'.<sup>200</sup> Drawing on this brief background about Bloor, one might say that Dos Passos gives Mary French similar responsibilities. An example is when Mary, encouraged by her mother to go abroad for fun with her friend Ada, responds, "if you really have a little money to spare, you might let me have something for our milkfund. After all miners' children aren't guilty of anything" (1225). The 'milkfund' here has strong maternal connotations. Mary, a reader of *Theory of the Leisure Class*, who ultimately breaks free from what Veblen postulates about passively self-sacrificing working women, here wants to protect a destitute class from hunger at the expense of leisure. Through this proletarian solidarity, and not unlike Mother Bloor,<sup>201</sup> Mary embodies an emblematic Motherly collectivism.

The intermingling of radical and feminine qualities in proletarian contexts becomes

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<sup>198</sup> Brown, "The "Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World" of the Communist Party, U.S.A.: Feminism, Maternalism, and "Mother Bloor", 537-70 (p. 537; 544).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 548.

<sup>200</sup> Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 117-140 (p. 121).

<sup>201</sup> See Ibid., 121-2.

the novel's answer to social injustices. Unlike George, Ben and Don, who do not contribute to the attempt to save the lives of Sacco and Vanzetti, Mary joins this cause. In her last appearance in the novel, she insists, "[s]omething very serious has happened in Pennsylvania. I have a great deal of work to do organizing a protest" (1238). This passage refutes Iain Colley's claim in 1978 that *The Big Money* is 'a novel of defeat. The deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti mark the end of a chapter, not a new beginning'.<sup>202</sup> Alfred Kazin, examining modern American prose literature including *U.S.A.*, sees Dos Passos as a socialist novelist empathetic towards the 'defeated' revolutionary characters. To Kazin, Mary is Dos Passos' most admirable character in the trilogy: she is 'a defeated Bolshevik. And it is only the defeated Bolsheviks whom Dos Passos ever really likes. The undefeated seem really to defeat themselves'.<sup>203</sup> Colin Hutchinson more recently argues that drinking and 'hedonism' are the reasons behind the ultimate failure of the trilogy's radical men in achieving social progress.<sup>204</sup> When proletarian issues reach a peak with the Sacco-Vanzetti case, Mary, by contrast, 'spent long evenings trying to coax communists, socialists, anarchists, liberals into working together' (1149). The effort of bringing together individuals of diverse political backgrounds suggests Mary's ability to initiate social change, generated primarily from her sense of collectivism.

Vorse's *Strike!* features a similar gathering politicised quality embodied largely by the female characters. In this proletarian novel, which models the martyrdom of Mamie Lewes after that of Wiggins whose second version of 'Mill Mother's Lament' is included in *The Big Money*'s late Newsreel, Vorse illustrates the ability of women to unifying strikers. Joseph R. Urgo observes that the women in *Strike!* are 'inclined to collectivist politics and true

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<sup>202</sup> Iain Colley, *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 66-119 (p. 117).

<sup>203</sup> Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 312-359 (p. 346).

<sup>204</sup> Colin Hutchinson, 'The Complicity of Consumption: Hedonism and Politics in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* and John Dos Passos's *USA*', *Journal of American Studies*, 48.1 (2014), 173-198 (p. 173).

Communism, and the men are in need of their guidance'.<sup>205</sup> Vorse's biographer similarly notes that in one of the novel's climactic scenes, Vorse's women are the ones who "'manned" the dangerous picket lines' and who decide that a man, Fred Beal, cannot lead a strike because of his 'lack of organization'.<sup>206</sup> Notably, in the same year of *The Big Money*'s appearance, John Steinbeck portrays the failure of a male-led agrarian strike in his *In Dubious Battle*, wherein a female character, Lisa, criticises the fact that the striking men talk without undertaking actions that are more radical.<sup>207</sup> Abby Werlock examines this proletarian novel and argues: 'Although Lisa may be homeless [...] her voice becomes increasingly assertive, confident, and revealing'.<sup>208</sup> Indirectly, the novel suggests the necessity of women's actions rather than men's words, a point Vorse and Dos Passos develop further in their contemporaneous novels.

The Communist Party in the 1920s and 1930s, which both Dos Passos and Vorse criticise in these novels, was critically seen as overlooking women's issues and their agency in its agenda. Mother Bloor, a Communist Party leader during the 1930s, acknowledged in her autobiography in 1940 the Communist Party's prejudice against its female members:

I do not minimize what our Party has done toward bringing about true equality, admitting no discriminating of race, color, or creed in our ranks. But I have often felt, earlier indeed, more than today, that there has been some hesitancy in giving women full equal responsibilities with men. As for myself, I have no complaints. I have been honored with great responsibilities [...] We women must take our place consciously

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<sup>205</sup> Joseph R. Urgo, 'Proletarian Literature and Feminism: The Gastonia Novels and Feminist Protest', *Minnesota Review*, 24 (1985), 64-84 (p. 70).

<sup>206</sup> Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse*, p. 237.

<sup>207</sup> Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Collier, 1936), p. 267.

<sup>208</sup> Abby. H. P. Werlock, 'Looking at Lisa: The Function of the Feminine in Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*', in *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936-1939*, ed. by Tetsumaro Hayashi (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 46-63 (p. 59).

by the side of men, dropping any sense of inferiority. We must speak up without waiting to be asked, *and we must have something to say*.<sup>209</sup>

It is likely that Dos Passos was aware of these gendered leftist politics and of other policies, too, with which he seemed unsatisfied. A year before publishing *The Big Money*, the novelist, resentful at the communists' invasion of a Socialist meeting in Madison Square Garden, registered his disappointment with the Communist Party in a letter to Malcom Cowley:

The reason I see no other ground is that I don't believe the Communist movement is capable of doing anything but provoke oppression and I no longer believe that the end justifies the means—means and ends have got to be one—I also wanted to bring up the important problem of the worker-technician versus the bureaucrat which exists on both sides of political fences.<sup>210</sup>

Dos Passos broadens his leftist views to include ideas like the advancement of the proletariat's position through any person, regardless of his social background. And Mary in *The Big Money*, who carries the torch of social activity, becomes this representative.

*The Big Money*, like other Popular Front novels, seeks justice for the proletarians, and, further, it presents hope in Mary's leftist-leaning work for the proletariat despite Mary's encounter of gendered tensions. The political philosopher Richard Rorty notes that the left was, for radicals in modern America, 'the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved', and it promises to 'struggle for social justice'.<sup>211</sup> Rorty addresses the progressive influences of leftist thoughts by poets like Whitman on the advancement of morals and ideals (like addressing the rights of the poor, the African Americans, and women) in 1960s America.<sup>212</sup> Dos Passos refers to Whitman in his sketch on Duncan, which brings to the fore Duncan's reflection of attempted social agency rather than her interest in liberating

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<sup>209</sup> qtd., in Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 117-140 (pp. 121-2).

<sup>210</sup> Dos Passos, 'To Malcolm Cowley', in *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, ed. by Townsend Ludington (Boston: Gambit, 1973), p. 477.

<sup>211</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 3-38 (p. 14).

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 75-107 (pp. 106-7).



women from gendered limits. The central narrative on Mary French, which mentions neither Duncan nor Whitman, goes further to indicate that Mary, the fictionalised social activist who does not consider herself a Communist Party member, never speaks of women's rights or matters nor receives a legal and free abortion (1233; 1149). On the other hand, Mary's revolutionary activities turn words into actions. Eddy Spellman, a fictionalised communist member, reminds Don in a late scene: 'You feed miss Mary up good, Comrade Stevens. We don't want her gettin' sick.... If all the real party members worked like she does we'd have ... hell, we'd have the finest kind of a revolution by the spring of the year' (1220). The quotation is an indirect criticism of the Communist Party which, at the time of the novel's action, minimised 'woman question' and their proletarian agency in spite of their contributions to and sacrifices for the Communist Party.<sup>213</sup>

Dos Passos, after embracing myths like men's capacity in leading a communal radical change as it occurs in Conroy's *The Disinherited* and in his own Third Period novels, had presumably followed a trait of the Popular Front, populism (speaking for 'the people' and having faith in everyone's potential),<sup>214</sup> to evolve Mary's proletarian activity. While technically the novelist continues to use the various devices he used earlier, politically he, having detached himself from the Communist Party, no longer sees men's militant actions as the answer to proletarian problems. According to Michael Denning, though, the whole *U.S.A.* trilogy is a 'lament' for the decline and fall of American ideals (for example, domestic life and men's political activities).<sup>215</sup> Jun Young Lee, who discusses dialecticism in the trilogy and the totality of political themes that the novelist seeks to achieve through the four devices, considers Denning's view to be limited, and maintains that Dos Passos' text is 'a hymn of

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<sup>213</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 318-327 (pp. 322-3).

<sup>214</sup> See Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 1- 7 (p. 5).

<sup>215</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 163-99 (p. 189). See also page 198.

faith for the utopian resolution of American history'.<sup>216</sup> Dos Passos represents women supporting this resolution. Denning contends that the Popular Front culture, which had not produced U.S.A.,<sup>217</sup> was criticised for its 'sentimental populism' and 'masculinism', features that substantially empowered the 'laboring of American culture'.<sup>218</sup> The labouring reinforces the burial of women's questions, for this culture prioritises addressing and solving the proletarian struggle.<sup>219</sup> Presumably having witnessed bourgeois women's hard work, even in a context that marginalised their concerns, Dos Passos enables Mary's entrance to the proletariat, and depicts the uprising of her proletarian consciousness. One might say that the novelist utilises the Popular Front's feature of populism to draw out Mary's political agency.

The distinction of Mary from the novel's other characters reaches a crescendo in one of the novel's last scenes, the cocktail party – a literal gathering spot of people – which takes place in the home of rich and apolitical Eveline. Although Mary attends the party with other radicals, like George, and her friend Ada, only Mary resents Eveline's wasting the money on such an event, and she starts thinking about her social projects. "Just think", she declares to Ada, "what our reliefcommittee could do with the money that woman wastes on senseless entertaining" (1231). In addition, she deplores the presence of actors, like Margo, at the party: "I'm sick of seeing movie actors on the screen [...] I don't want to see them in real life" (1233). In term of its distance from actual reality, the party resembles acting or the American dream more broadly. As Denning observes, this party also echoes the dance marathon that Horace McCoy depicts earlier in his novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935),<sup>220</sup> wherein working-class people dance for hours while Hollywood sponsors are watching to

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<sup>216</sup> Lee, *History and Utopian Disillusion*, 149-194 (p. 161).

<sup>217</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 163-199 (p. 166).

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 115-159 (p. 117).

<sup>219</sup> See Ibid., 3-50 (p. 32).

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 163-199 (p. 183).

award the winners. Eveline's party in Dos Passos' text, to use Denning's words about the dancing in McCoy's novel, becomes 'an allegory of an American capitalism in which endless, repetitive amusement and entertainment is oppressive, consuming the dreams of its youth'.<sup>221</sup> It is an allusion to the American dream that Margo chases, and which Mary challenges and withdraws herself from.

Had she simply been 'slumming', to use Paula Rabinowitz's description of photographer Margaret Bourke-White's engagement with the lives of the poor in the 1930s,<sup>222</sup> rather than assimilating into the working class, Mary would have no concrete knowledge of proletarian realities. Henceforth, she might have remained in her class or become a copy of Eveline, a hysterical woman who tries to escape the shallowness of her life through lavish parties and who ends up committing suicide. By the novel's close, Mary considers the silliness of Ada's grief over Eveline's suicide: "I have too much to do to spend my time taking care of hysterical women a day like this" (1238). In marked contrast, her decision to organise a protest meeting in Pittsburgh comes immediately after hearing of radical Eddy Spellman's murder: "We ought to have been in Pittsburgh all along" (1237). The opposing reactions towards the two deaths affirms Mary's bias against the rich's private struggles, and the continuity of her commitment to proletarian activity. In *1919*, which predates *The Big Money* by four years, Anne Elizabeth, a Near East Relief girl, expresses a political commitment that ends with her marriage, which is followed by suicide. Mary neither indulges herself in a domestic relationship, like Anne, nor is driven to suicide, like the other women in the trilogy's Newsreels and as is displayed in the headline 'Woman of Mystery Tries Suicide in Park Lake' (806). Neither does Mary lose herself in the deceptive life that propels Eveline to suicide. Even more actively than Bonny, who helps Larry realise the falsity of the American dream, Mary initiates proletarian action. She is the most dynamic of

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>222</sup> Rabinowitz, 'Margaret Bourke-White's Red Coat; Or, Slumming in 1930s', 187-207 (p. 188).

*The Big Money*'s women, including Margo whose self-advancement fits into the American dream's pattern.

Dos Passos indirectly suggests the importance of women to the working class by placing a biographical segment on Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect who built 'the lives of workers and dwellers in the buildings', between Newsreels and a Camera Eye scattered between narrative sections on Margo and Mary (1132). Wright, the modernist architect, saw buildings as 'space[s]' rather than objects and he used architecture as a means to indicate 'aesthetic' as well as 'political' signification.<sup>223</sup> Dos Passos, similarly, regarded writing as a profession that engaged both of these concerns.<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, he represents his fictional female protagonists as dynamic characters who try to figuratively build up the lives of others. Margo emotionally and financially supports sick and poor men whom she knows, although they previously objectified her. Mary enlarges this generosity by living for the working class. Like other women from the 1920s-1930s, Margo and Mary perpetually attempt to emancipate themselves from gendered expectations. The women presented in Duncan's biography, two Camera Eyes, and thirteen scattered Newsreels, on the other hand, lack personal autonomy and demonstrate less social agency.

The different and evolved portrayals of women and their agency in *The Big Money* lend credence to Janet Casey's observation in *The Novel and the American Left* that 1930s novels of modernist form use dialogic devices to expose and alleviate proletarian struggles. Casey, elsewhere articulating Dos Passos' attempts to give women a voice and a radical feminine presence, mentions *U.S.A.* as an example. In this trilogy, writes Casey, Dos Passos 'experimented with unique combinations of conventional narration and modernist stylistics, creating a sense of dynamism through dialogic structures'.<sup>225</sup> In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos,

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<sup>223</sup> Tallack, *Twentieth-Century America*, 114-144 (p. 127).

<sup>224</sup> Dos Passos, 'The Writer as Technician', 169-172 (p. 169).

<sup>225</sup> Casey, ed., '(Left) Contexts and Considerations', in *The Novel and the American Left*, ix-xviii (p. xi).

who abandoned the Communist Party and sought to write like a modernist to nuance political issues, creates a sense of enlargement in the ways he represents women and their respective social consciousness. The Newsreels present passive, emotionally confused, or societally confined working women, trying to ultimately evolve their relative social agency; the Camera Eyes underscore women's kindness; the biography of Duncan's attends to her effort to help her nation without acknowledging the liberty she gains as a dancer. In the central narratives, Margo, who becomes a Hollywood actress, achieves her emancipation as a 1920s New Woman, expands the autonomy Duncan called for, and acts in a manner resembling that of Mae West. Meanwhile, she shows small acts of generosity to her male friends, in spite of them mistreating her. Mary, as another version of a 1920s New Woman, devotes herself entirely to the working class. In spite of experiencing sexist treatment, she chooses, like other female radical journalists and activists from the 1930s and earlier decades, to foster her proletarian consciousness. She becomes a figurative mother to the proletariat, more so than the novel's other women. This chapter maintains that in *The Big Money*'s peripheral modes and its central narratives, Dos Passos attempts, through modernist form and feminised radical content, to challenge gendered strictures, to develop women's liberty and their social agency within a context that called for men's proletarian activity.

## CHAPTER IV

### John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: Layers of Female Agency and Mobility in Dust

#### Bowl Contexts

The different narrative forms in John Dos Passos' *The Big Money* are fragmented, yet by creating a connection between these elements the novel establishes a sense of development to the represented working women and their social consciousness in spite of gendered expectations within early twentieth-century America. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which documents the Dust Bowl migration from Oklahoma to California in segments as well as in a central fictional narrative about a Dust Bowler family called the Joads, also seeks to mobilise its female protagonists' position.

In this novel, which contains modernist, documentary, fictionalised, and other elements, Steinbeck disrupts the gendered conventions of agrarian labour that associate farm women with the domestic as well as adjunctive. To be sure, in the early twentieth century, agrarian American women performed traditional roles: helping their male counterparts, raising their children, and managing the expenses of their families.<sup>1</sup> The Dust Bowl storm that hit the Southern plains from 1935-1939 confused masculine ideals, as the farm men left their lands and became migrants rather than family leaders and breadwinners,<sup>2</sup> yet the loss of this custodian role rarely transformed the status of their wives.<sup>3</sup> While Dust Bowl documentarians, including Steinbeck in his reportage work, re-present this unchanging

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<sup>1</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (p. 9); Casey, *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 21-50 (pp. 35-6).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 45; Jackson Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography* (London: William Heinemann, 1984), 334-52 (pp. 334-5); Lindop and Goldstein, *America in the 1930s*, 25-38 (p. 27).

<sup>3</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 36-77 (p. 48).

gendered status,<sup>4</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath* attempts to defy it. The novel's report-like segments, known as inter-chapters, through the use of symbols and realities, imply possibilities (albeit confined ones) of female agency. The novel's central narrative goes further to construct female protagonists as developing until becoming literal and symbolic agents of cooperation with people beyond their family's circle. Via its integrated inter and central narratives, more so than its contemporary documentary agrarian texts, the novel offers dynamic representations of women. This style is reminiscent of other 1930s proletarian experimental novels, including *The Big Money*. However, unlike Dos Passos, Steinbeck, a populist communicator who never joined the Communist Party,<sup>5</sup> and so was largely unaffected by its tendency to minimise the integration of gender and class questions,<sup>6</sup> adds to this experimentalism his extended use of symbolism. And, sometimes, he modifies representations of Dust Bowl female migrants to emphasise female agency.

Previous literary critics, such as Janet Casey, who pays attention to the novel's use of symbolism, and Robert Con Davis, who acknowledges the significance of Rose's breastfeeding the starving man at the novel's close,<sup>7</sup> argue that its women have limited agency. Casey, for instance, in her reading of Josephine Johnson's *Now in November* (1934) and its figurative use of the language, regards the breastfeeding scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* as 'reframing the maternal body as a means of *ideological* propagation, making visible the

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<sup>4</sup> See Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 45-51 (p. 50); Dorothea Lange, 'Migrant Mother', from, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-DIG-fsa-8b29516. <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998021539/PP/>>; Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 56-106 (p. 67); Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115-160 (p. 137).

<sup>5</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook, 'Steinbeck, the People, and the Party', in *Literature at the Barricades*, 82-95 (pp. 82-3).

<sup>6</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 3-50 (p. 32); Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 15-27 (p. 23).

<sup>7</sup> 'This last scene', Davis writes, 'epitomizes the novelist's faith in romantic sentiment, out of which comes all familial and social change, all political organization, all human activity'. Robert Con Davis, ed., 'Introduction', *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath*, 1-14 (p. 10).

female's assumed role as nourishment for a body politic that is inheritedly [sic] male'.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Davis argues:

Yet important as women are in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the serious work of social revolution—especially that which Tom Joad undertakes—is *man's* work [...] Tom Joad draws his inspiration from Ma Joad but then he goes forth 'as a man' to remake the world. At the end of the novel, he, not she, is transformed into a spirit of the labour movement.<sup>9</sup>

However, the novel also ends with Rose, rather than Tom, as she nurtures the starving stranger. This chapter intends not to revise these and similar arguments or to displace Tom or replace him with Ma Joad or Rose. Nevertheless, it aims to tease out the narrative wherein significant agency is *also* given to women, and wherein symbolism moves in complex ways between the inter-chapter sections and the narratives to reveal a greater sense of female agency and potential in the novel than has sometimes been acknowledged.

This chapter argues that by interspersing the inter-chapters about anonymous Dust Bowl migrants into the story about the Joads Steinbeck both exposes and subverts the restrictions of gendered conventions which claim women's inactivity in agrarian contexts. The novel's inter-chapters contextualise the Dust Bowl to which men and women react similarly, and, further, these segments seek to show female agency symbolically. In the novel's main narrative, Steinbeck features female characters who during their departure from Oklahoma to California reach a stage of development in their actions that renders them agents of cooperation. Migrant Ma Joad and her daughter Rose of Sharon break away from domestic confinement, subordinate wifehood and self-sacrificing motherhood. Steinbeck traces these women's transformations and their own choices to feed strangers in need within

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<sup>8</sup> Casey, 'Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women's Progressive Fiction', 96-117 (p. 96). Italics in original.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Con Davis, ed., 'Introduction', *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 1-14 (p. 10).



the Dust Bowl context, thus exploring the female agency symbolised in the novel's inter-chapters.

That Steinbeck worked as a journalist shortly before composing this novel is significant.<sup>10</sup> This kind of labour was characterised at that time by populism, a Popular Front way of speaking for and about exploited people, having faith in people's capacity to change their circumstances, and being 'eager to capture the volatile tastes of the public'.<sup>11</sup> In "America! America!," a chapter on the literature of the 1930s in his study *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin maintains that '[n]ever before did a nation seem so hungry for news of itself',<sup>12</sup> for '[e]veryone was writing documentary prose' in this period.<sup>13</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt's government, as a part of its New Deal plan, funded projects that attempted to represent agrarian plights so that they could be better understood. The Farm Security Administration (FSA), for instance, sent photographers to farmland in the South to document sharecroppers' struggles, aiming to persuade Congress 'to implement many of the New Deal's agricultural programs'.<sup>14</sup> Journalists and novelists with leftist leanings, such as Steinbeck, also supported by the New Deal arts projects like the Works Progress Administration (WPA), collaborated with the government's commissioned photographers in photo-text documentary projects.<sup>15</sup> Among these collaborations are Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus* (1939), and Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). The projects show rural struggles from sympathetic visual and descriptive angles and attempt to represent proletarian realities, even if the perspective is

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<sup>10</sup> Wallenberg, 'Introduction', in *The Harvest Gypsies*, pp. v-vii.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 1-7 (p. 5). See also pages 6; 151; 163.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 485-518 (p. 486).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 363-399 (p. 368).

<sup>14</sup> Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 35-55 (p. 43).

<sup>15</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, pp. 92-101.

typically a middle-class one.<sup>16</sup> One trait of this style of documentary culture from the Popular Front phase is to sentimentalise the proletarians by intensifying their heroic fortitude or presenting them as victimised people.<sup>17</sup> Essentially, *The Grapes of Wrath* addresses the Dust Bowl migration. And, notably, the novel started in 1936 as reports Steinbeck wrote for the *San Francisco News* in the pamphlet *The Harvest Gypsies*, which were re-printed in 1938 in *Their Blood is Strong* alongside Lange's photographs of Dust Bowlers in Californian camps.<sup>18</sup> Published in 1939, the novel represents some of the Popular Front's documentary and populist stance, and, further, it focuses on women's role in the proletarian struggle.

This chapter's first section examines how Steinbeck presents migrant women as symbolic of agency in the novel's inter-chapters, the segments which seek to document the Dust Bowl experience. The section also highlights the equality Steinbeck creates between the migrants and the temporary vocal activity he gives to women. Sections two and three investigate closely and respectively the development in Ma Joad's and Rose's personal dispositions, which enable them to sustain, if not ultimately save, others' lives. These two sections maintain that Ma and Rose initially accept societally assigned domestic roles. Gradually, however, as the migration journey and its hard conditions continue, they add something new to their personalities. These traits include cooperation with those outside the Joads' circle, willingness to undertake picking and stoop labour with the Joad men, and the ability to make decisions that save or change other people's lives. All this distinguishes them from women of the novel's inter-chapters who end up in a silent position. The chapter goes on to further argue that the Joads' little daughter, Ruthie, is expected to become an agent of limitless cooperation, as Rose does in the breastfeeding scene, due to Ma's direct and indirect influence on her children's characters. The chapter closes with a suggestion that the gradual

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<sup>16</sup> See Ibid., p. 61; Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, p. 36; 40.

<sup>17</sup> See Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, pp. 56-63.

<sup>18</sup> See Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 92-153 (p. 125).

release from wifehood's sexist obligations enables Ma and, ultimately, Rose to evolve their agencies from the familial circle into wider society. The chapter investigates these women's representations in relation to the novel's form and content. Therefore, it contextualises the Dust Bowl, and also refers to contemporaneous publications including the photo-text projects, Margaret Hagood's 1939 sociological study *Mothers of the South*, and Steinbeck's own essays about Dust Bowlers. The chapter also employs cultural critics' views about sentimentalised representations in the decade's documentary writings, and studies about women's positions as mothers and farm workers in 1930s America. This material helps investigate Steinbeck's representation of the lives – and the agency – of Dust Bowl women.

In previous scholarship, critics react differently to the novel's overall message about the 1930s. They consider it an embodiment of proletarian or political messages,<sup>19</sup> or an exploration of radical 1930s ideas, a blending, or revision of late nineteenth-century American norms (such as sentimentalism, transcendentalism, the American dream).<sup>20</sup> Other critics pay attention to the novel's use of symbolism and the connectedness between its integrated narratives,<sup>21</sup> consider or question the truthfulness of its events,<sup>22</sup> examine its biological and ecological thematic significance,<sup>23</sup> or classify it as a novel historicising the pessimism of the Dust Bowl that caused a mass migration.<sup>24</sup> Very few literary critics

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<sup>19</sup> See Kristine R. Yee, 'John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: A Call to Action', *The Explicator* 71.4 (2013), pp. 255-258.

<sup>20</sup> French, *The Social Novel at the End of an Era*, 42-86; Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 3-38; Cook, 'Steinbeck, the People, and the Party', 82-95; Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 310-18 (p. 318); Alan Wald, 'Steinbeck and the Proletarian Novel', in *Cambridge History of the American Novel*, eds. by Leonard Cassuto and others (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 671-85; Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 87-111.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick: Routledge, 1958), 144-177.

<sup>22</sup> See Robert DeMott, ed., 'Introduction', *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), vii-xliv (p. xii); Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 119-142 (p. 121); Samantha Baskind, 'The "True" Story: *LIFE* Magazine, Horace Bristole, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*', *Steinbeck Studies* 15.2 (2004), pp. 39-74.

<sup>23</sup> See Renata Lucena Dalmao, "'Modern Monsters'", *Old Habits: Nature, Humans, and Technology in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath**, *Steinbeck Review* 12.1 (2015), pp. 26-38.

<sup>24</sup> See Jason Spangler, 'We're on a Road to Nowhere: Steinbeck, Kerouac, and the Legacy of the Great Depression', *Studies in the Novel* 40.3 (2008), pp. 308-327.

investigate women's cooperation which the central narrative suggests as a solution to the Dust Bowl problems documented in the inter-chapters.

Critics such as Morris Dickstein and Barbara A. Heavilin point to Ma Joad's reflection of hybrid, empathetic and rigid, traits.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in her focused study about the revised nineteenth-century sentimentalism in novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Now in November*, Jennifer A. Williamson maintains that 'Women, for Steinbeck, become more masculine in the face of this male crisis [the crisis of capitalist failures] and because, out of necessity, their authority expands as they become more equal participants in the collective effort to lead and survive'.<sup>26</sup> Other critics, nonetheless, such as Warren Motley, Rebecca Hinton, Edwin T. Bowden, David Minter, and Sigridur Gudmarsdottir read Ma Joad and Rose as helpers whose support is either mythic or solely maternal and confined to surrounding people.<sup>27</sup> Even the critics who see Rose's breastfeeding of the starving man as significant argue that the actual possibility for social reform is given to her brother, Tom Joad, undertaking the responsibility of fighting for the poor and the oppressed.<sup>28</sup> Casey, in her discussion of Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* (1923) and Johnson's *Now in November* suggests that in contrast to these female-authored texts, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the decade's most popular novel, symbolises agrarianism and its masculinist politics. According to Casey, Kelley and Johnson avoid aligning farmwomen with conventional tasks, such as becoming mothers and helping in farming activities, as she argues Steinbeck does. These female

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<sup>25</sup> Dickstein, 'Steinbeck and the Great Depression', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103.1 (2004), 111-32 (pp. 125-6); Barbara A. Heavilin, "'A note . . . of great objective purity': Steinbeck's Evocative Language of Heart and Mind in *The Grapes of Wrath*", *Steinbeck Review*, 12.1 (2015), v-x.

<sup>26</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 87-111 (p. 110).

<sup>27</sup> Warren Motley, 'Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad's Role in *The Grapes of Wrath*', *American Literature* 54.3 (1982), pp. 397-412; Rebecca Hinton, 'Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*', *The Explicator* (1998) 56.2, pp. 101-3; Edwin T. Bowden, 'The Commonplace and The Grotesque', in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath*, ed. by Robert Con Davis, 15-23; Minter, *A Cultural History of the American Novel*, 181-95 (p. 190); Sigridur Gudmarsdottir, 'Rapes of Earth and *Grapes of Wrath*: Steinbeck, Ecofeminism and the Metaphor of Rape', *Feminist Theology* 18.2 (2010), pp. 206-222.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Con Davis, ed., 'Introduction', *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath*, 1-14 (p. 10); Matthew Langione, 'John Steinbeck and the Perfectibility of Man (Louis Owens Essay Prize Winner)', *The Steinbeck Review*, 3.2 (2006), 87-99.

novelists, argues Casey, disrupt 'orthodox associations among desire, agency, women, and the land'.<sup>29</sup> Steinbeck's novel tries to disrupt this association, too, by its integration of two narratives, and its tracing of the Joad women's transformation into central agents of cooperation.

Casey's introduction to *The Novel and the American Left* affirms that 1930s novels of modernist form and radical content, like Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, address social struggles and create a sense of mobility from them, too.<sup>30</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath*, which bears structural similarities to *U.S.A.*, is an attempt to offer dynamic and also symbolic representations of women within a Dust Bowl context. Steinbeck, transcending agrarian documentary culture's norm of reiterating and reinforcing gendered traditions, liberates Ma and Rose from domestic confines and advocates their model of cooperative agency. This discussion starts though with the inter-chapters, which depict the shared experience and shared passivity of anonymous men and women confronting the conditions of the Dust Bowl, but that suggest, through symbols and other figures, the possibility of certain forms of female agency.

### **The Inter-Chapters and the Symbolic Possibilities of Dust Bowl Women's Agency**

Before composing *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck reported on the massive dust storm that hit the Southern plains and forced a large number of farm men and women from Oklahoma to migrate to California to seek food, shelter, and work, which they struggled to find on their arrival.<sup>31</sup> The novel's inter-chapters, which function like report-segments, encompass this historical narrative.<sup>32</sup> In these vignettes, Steinbeck also symbolises the agency of female Dust Bowl migrants. The sixteen inter-chapters show male and female Dust Bowlers undergoing

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<sup>29</sup> Casey, 'Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women's Progressive Fiction', 96-117 (p. 100).

<sup>30</sup> See Casey, ed., '(Left) Contexts and Considerations', in *The Novel and the American Left*, ix-xviii (p. xi).

<sup>31</sup> DeMott, ed., 'Introduction', vii-xliv (p. xii); Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 318f. See Worster, *Dust Bowl*, p. 45; Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck*, 334-52 (pp. 334-5).

<sup>32</sup> *Grapes*, pp. 3-7f, 87f, 119f, 160f, 385-8f.

the same experience of migration. Steinbeck also, notably, presents several instances of female agency (through speaking, cooking, and resisting Dust Bowl struggles). While elsewhere in the novel agency is presented through action and speech, in the inter-chapters agency tends to take symbolic form, as in women raising the first questions when the storm hits the plains; taking the ‘stove’ when the migration starts; and silently watching when their men are not working in California. Steinbeck uses two further symbols: the ‘hills’ and ‘grapes of wrath’ to respectively stand for breastfeeding and the collective resistance of Dust Bowl struggles. The Newsreels in *The Big Money* depict fragmented views from the public media wherein female workers are ultimately given agency, and *The Grapes of Wrath*’s inter-chapters function similarly. They present Steinbeck’s previously collected ‘filtering facts’ about Dust Bowl men and women,<sup>33</sup> and allude to women’s cooperative actions, which Steinbeck extends in the novel’s story. As Robert DeMott contends, Steinbeck’s reporting about Dust Bowl migrants ‘created his obsessive urge to tell their story [in *The Grapes of Wrath*] honestly but also movingly’.<sup>34</sup> Peter Lisca, examining the inter-chapters and the symbols in them, observes that these segments provide a ‘social background’ to the novel’s main narrative.<sup>35</sup> The novel’s inter-chapters, as discussed here, use symbolism to depict female agency and to indicate women’s roles in coping with the Dust Bowl.

The introductory inter-chapter sketches the dust storm’s influence on the earth and its crops, and it also shows how women get a chance to speak rather than silently watch. The narrator describes: ‘[t]he surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale’ (3). Initially, men and women alike react to this disaster as helpless figures; they ‘looked at the ruined corn’ and became ‘silent’ and static (6-7). Women, however, break this silence when asking their men, ‘What’ll we do? And the men

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<sup>33</sup> I am quoting here Janet Casey’s description of U.S.A.’s Newsreels. See Casey, ‘Historicizing the Female in U.S.A.’, 249-264 (p. 251).

<sup>34</sup> DeMott, ed., ‘Introduction’, vii-xliv (p. xii).

<sup>35</sup> Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*, 144-177 (p. 156).

replied I don't know' (7). The women's question is the novel's first vocal response to the storm. This response resembles what appears in a photo-text project from two years earlier called *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), which describes the sharecropping burden on Southern farms and shows how women, as well as men, had to take action in response. Erskine Caldwell writes in this project, which includes photographs taken by Margaret Bourke-White, 'Sharecropping began. It was necessary for his wife to work alongside him to help with the crop, because they have to raise more cotton than ever before in order to have enough of their own, after half of it was given to the landlord'.<sup>36</sup> While Steinbeck initially intended to describe the Dust Bowl's consequences in a documentary book like Caldwell's and Bourke-White's rather than a novel,<sup>37</sup> the early segment in *The Grapes of Wrath* situates both agrarians and their wives in a static position. The narrator comments that these females know 'deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole' (7). These men's lack of immediate action, which their women want them to have, encourages the women in the novel's first inter-chapter to ask about how they are all going to respond to the crisis of the Dust Bowl.

Dos Passos writes a similar scene in *The Big Money*'s Camera-Eye sections, in which his persona observes a woman bringing 'a tincup of water' to a man in need (*TBM*, 1208). 'The Depression', as Susan Ware maintains, 'propelled many [American] women into new patterns of behaviour that might not have occurred otherwise'.<sup>38</sup> This illuminates women's cooperative actions in novels like *The Big Money*, as discussed in the preceding chapter.

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<sup>36</sup> Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 16-48 (p. 29).

<sup>37</sup> The novelist first asked for a photographer to join him for the Californian camps. The original plan was for Steinbeck to write and for Horace Bristol, *Life* magazine's chosen photographer, to take the photographs (Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, p. 125).

<sup>38</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (p. 17). Another feminist historian contends that 'Like a flood or a hurricane or a war, the Depression stripped away incidentals and brought people face to face with the basic questions of existence—food and shelter and a job, but also a personal identity and relationships'. Peter G. Filene, ed., 'The Long Amnesia: Depression, War, and Domesticity', *Him /Her /Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 148-176 (p. 157).

David Minter, in *A Cultural History of the American Novel*, observes the attention writers give to proletarian struggles and the integration between modernist form and social content in novels like *U.S.A.*.<sup>39</sup> Minter goes on to argue that Steinbeck's female characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*, 'become empowered only when his male characters falter [...] and they therefore surrender power as soon as the men of the family are ready to resume their roles as protectors and providers'.<sup>40</sup> An early segment in the novel illustrates this by showing how both farmers and their wives react to their landlords' use of machines. They 'stared after the tractor', and on this occasion the wife 'was beside' her husband, whose 'rifle [was] in his hand' (53). This physical placement signifies women's equality to men, who are expected to protect their families. A later segment prefigures women's rather than men's pivotal role during the migration to California by listing first the tools which will be most useful for survival – the same tools which are most frequently and traditionally used by women:

Now you know well what we can take and what we can't take. We'll be camping out—a few pots to cook and wash in, and mattress and comforts, lantern and buckets, and a piece of canvas. Use that for a tent. This Kerosene can. Know what this? That's the stove. And clothes—take all the clothes. And—the rifle? Wouldn't go out naked of a rifle. When shoes and clothes and food, when even hope is gone, we'll have the rifle. (119)

While the passage closes with prioritising the taking of the 'rifle', traditionally a man's tool, it starts with realising the necessity of taking 'pots' and the 'stove', which signify women's domesticity. This minor detail foreshadows the importance of the role of women in the journey to California, albeit by initially accepting their confined duty as nurturers.

The middle, climactic inter-chapters, further, situate these men and women in the same circumstances during their migration. 'HIGHWAY 66' becomes their 'main migrant

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<sup>39</sup> Minter, *A Cultural History of the American Novel*, 160-66 (p. 166).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-95 (p. 190).



road', 'the road of flight' (160). Their dreams become one; they speak 'of the future: Wonder what it's like out there?', and their one assurance is: 'If we can get work it'll be fine' (271). These shared concerns exhibit a lack of discrimination between men and women, especially when 'along the highways the cars of the migrant people crawled out like bugs', indicating these people are all equal in their struggles (273). The only difference is established while camping: women begin to cook and men to pitch the tents. Notably, the inter-chapters' men, in the narrator's description, become 'not farm men any more, but migrant men' (267). It is a phrase concurring with what historian Robert McElvaine identifies as a 'man[hood]' problem in the 1930s: 'The man who was without a [work] position was, well, without a position'.<sup>41</sup> 'For most men, then', literary historian Josep M. Armengol writes,

[T]he Depression proved to be emasculating both at work and at home [...] Not only did they feel ashamed of themselves for being unable to work; they were usually despised by their own families, too, who saw them as equally 'unmanly'.<sup>42</sup>

James N. Gregory partly agrees with this view. Gregory suggests that within the context of the Dust Bowl, 'work roles and family authority systems' rarely changed.<sup>43</sup> In his novel's inter-chapters, Steinbeck, in the words of a 1939 review of the novel, 'speaks directly to the reader in panoramic essays'<sup>44</sup> on social issues, such as the Dust Bowlers' marginality in the West, which forced men and women into similar situations. These forced situations downplay men's roles as custodians and providers, and, actually, suggest that women may have been more empowered during the migration than men.

In spite of this possibility of female empowerment in California due to husbands' lack of jobs, the novel's last inter-chapter portrays women as mute in a staring, static position:

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<sup>41</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 170-97 (p. 181).

<sup>42</sup> Armengol, 'Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the Male Body in 1930s American Culture and Literature', 59-68 (p. 60).

<sup>43</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 36-77 (p. 48).

<sup>44</sup> 'Okies', in *John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. by in Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Crisler and Shillinglaw (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1996), p. 163.

The women watched the men, watched to see whether the break had come at last. The women stood silently and watched. And where a number of men gathered together, the fear went from their faces, and anger took its place. And the women sighed with relief, for they knew it was all right—the break had not come; and the break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath. (592)

Despite a belief in wrath's power in this last sketch, which differs from the earliest inter-chapters wherein women want their farm men to speak about what to do, women here are 'silently' watching their migrant men. Therefore, they seek their men to act, to turn their unspoken anger into radical actions.

In 1936 in Pea-Pickers Camp in Nipomo, California, Dorothea Lange, whose photographs of Dust Bowl migrants were collected in the FSA's file and which appeared in projects like Steinbeck's *Their Blood is Strong* (1938),<sup>45</sup> took one of the decade's most iconic photographs, the 'Migrant Mother'.<sup>46</sup> The photograph presents a maternal Dust Bowler, Florence Thompson,<sup>47</sup> who watches in silence while an infant in her lap and two older children huddle around her.<sup>48</sup> Such a photograph is an attempt to create in its viewers sympathy or even anger towards the burdens Dust Bowl migrant mothers encountered. *No Caption Needed*, a study of iconic American photographs, maintains that widely popular and well-remembered photographs like 'Migrant Mother', which represent key historical moments, elicit in an audience 'emotional identification' and appeal for 'political action'.<sup>49</sup> 'Migrant Mother', for example, 'evokes not just sympathy but compassion, an impulse to help that crosses social boundaries'.<sup>50</sup> The title of the photo, 'Migrant Mother', arouses in the

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<sup>45</sup> See Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 92-153 (p. 125).

<sup>46</sup> See T.H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1993), pp. 297-8.

<sup>47</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 137.

<sup>48</sup> See Lange, 'Migrant Mother', <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998021539/PP/>>. See also, Watkins, *The Great Depression*, p. 298.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 25-48 (27; 48).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-92 (p. 56).

viewer the desire to help such a woman and her children escape from the poverty they encountered in the Californian camps while her husband is absent.<sup>51</sup> Michael Denning also considers this picture to be a sentimentalised 'icon' of motherhood: 'The title seems an oxymoron, as if migrant and mother were contradictory; indeed, there is little sense of migration or movement in the photograph'.<sup>52</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath's* final inter-chapter, which also portrays migrant women silently watching, sentimentalises women's roles in bearing up the migration's burdens through their silent wait for their men's anger to turn into action.

Steinbeck's narrator ends the last segment, and the fragmented series of sixteen inter-chapters, with an implicitly hopeful symbol which likens the land to women's breasts: 'Tiny points of grass came through the earth, and in a few days the hills were pale green with the beginning of the year' (592). The narrator metaphorically equates these 'hills' to women's breasts in a previous inter-chapter: '[t]he full green hills are round and soft as breasts' (473). The analogy between hills and breasts is common in early twentieth-century novels that problematise late nineteenth-century American ideals. Most obviously, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which questions the nature of the American dream, Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, ultimately finds hope when he compares 'the old island' to 'a fresh, green breast of the new world' (*TGG*, 171). Similarly, by the close of Johnson's *Now in November*, narrator Marget, after the tragic loss of her self-sacrificing mother in a field fire, declares a figurative philosophy:

Faith gone with Mother [...] But there is the need and the desire left, and out of these hills they may come again. I cannot believe this is the end. (*NN*, 231)

Hope in change is evident in this quotation. Janet Casey suggests that 'Marget's refusal to sentimentalize nature has been a distinguishing aspect of both her personality and her

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>52</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 137.

narration'.<sup>53</sup> Williamson, investigating sentimentality in novels like Johnsons', makes a similar point: 'Marget's loss of faith prompts a new realization about the humanist philosophy undergirding her mother's beliefs'.<sup>54</sup> The final quotation by Marget also indicates her hope in the land and for workers' cooperation with one another. The hills which Marget refers to and the new world with which Nick ends his narration are symbols of hope, and in *The Grapes of Wrath*, that symbol is equated with women's breasts – a metaphor which points to the importance of women in the creation of the new world after the Dust Bowl.

The likeness between hills and breasts also appeared in 1930s paintings by regionalist artist Grant Wood, although for Wood, the relationship is at once erotic and nostalgic for nineteenth-century rural life.<sup>55</sup> In spite of the droughts hitting the Southern plains in the 1930s, Wood chose to paint 'lush fields and hills, evoking breasts, bellies, and thighs', and this style is evident in paintings like *Spring Turning* (1936).<sup>56</sup> The connection Wood indicates between the sensual representation of hills and hope for the renewal of rural life in America is nurturing rather than erotic in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The inter-chapters in Steinbeck's novel exhibit 'symbols' which sometimes appear in the main narrative, as Peter Lisca demonstrates, and they prove necessary to the novel's overall message.<sup>57</sup> According to Lisca, the novel ends with pessimism: the last inter-chapter intensively 're-enacts the whole drama of the Joads' journey in one uninterrupted continuity of suspense'.<sup>58</sup> The last segment also contains the symbol of the hill, which specifically prefigures the breastfeeding scene in the novel's final chapter. It is no coincidence that Steinbeck inserts this segment before Rose's nursing of a dying stranger. While Lisca suggests that the novel ends pessimistically, this inter-chapter foreshadows a hope that emerges in the central narrative. The 'hill' becomes

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<sup>53</sup> Casey, 'Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women's Progressive Fiction', 96-117 (p. 114).

<sup>54</sup> See Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 59-86 (p. 76).

<sup>55</sup> Erika Doss, *Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 97-118.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-118 (108).

<sup>57</sup> See Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*, 144-177 (pp. 158-9; 165-6).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-129 (p. 117).

green, thus symbolically standing for a 'fresh green breast',<sup>59</sup> and this analogy affirms a sense of hope, for at the end of the novel, this figurative hill saves a starving man's life. While Casey concludes that *The Grapes of Wrath*'s nursing scene supports women's adjunctive role in the agrarian struggle,<sup>60</sup> the scene's reading should also correspond with the novel's overall message and its layers of symbolic meanings. This scene, as examined in a later section, signifies the unbound cooperation Ma and Rose extend to others. Women, the inter-chapters attempt to show, offer symbolic, nurturing acts, and they believe in the necessity of turning 'wrath' into actions.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*'s inter-chapters and main narrative, this 'wrath' that the characters feel towards the injustice of their situation unifies people's souls. One of the last inter-chapters mentions: '[i]n the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage' (477). Steinbeck, in this instance, does not differentiate between the souls of men and women, and the same happens in *The Big Money*'s last Newsreel, which includes 'Mill Mother's Lament' which addresses 'Both you women and men' (*TBM*, 1207). This song unifies the radical intentions of low-paid working men and women, and *The Grapes of Wrath* indicates a similar unity symbolically. The 'grapes of wrath' in the novel's title and in the above inter-chapter functions figuratively, like the laughter in the title of Hughes' novel, examined in Chapter One. It stands for a mass of working-class people whose anger becomes one, under the same conditions, for the same reason: countering social injustices. And, this unifying 'wrath' alludes to Ralph W. Emerson's philosophy on the 'over-soul': 'one light which beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men'.<sup>61</sup> Steinbeck's Emerson-like character,<sup>62</sup> Jim Casy, a

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<sup>59</sup> See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 171.

<sup>60</sup> Casey, 'Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women's Progressive Fiction', 96-117 (p. 96).

<sup>61</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, 'The American Scholar', in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 43-59 (p. 56).

<sup>62</sup> See Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck*, 217-30 (p. 233).

preacher who becomes a union organiser, makes a similar point. Early in the novel, to his friend Tom Joad, who, after Casy's death decides to help the poor and the oppressed, Casy declares: "Maybe all men got one big soul ever' body's a part of" (33). This statement prefigures the one anger in people's souls, which the inter-chapters eventually symbolises, and which becomes actions in the novel's story. Sylvia Cook, in her contribution to *Literature at the Barricades*, which examines leftist novels' uses of modernist motifs,<sup>63</sup> points out that *The Grapes of Wrath* has 'mystical' and 'transcendental' messages – it replaces the 'socialist unity' idea with the 'Oversoul' philosophy.<sup>64</sup> This replacement and the unifying 'wrath' symbolically place migrants in the same position, and, further, creates a space for women's activity.

Steinbeck was preoccupied with depicting the reality of the Dust Bowl,<sup>65</sup> and in his novel, as he acknowledged in a letter to his literary agent and friend Elizabeth Otis in 1938, he was 'trying to write history while it [is] happening and I don't want to be wrong'.<sup>66</sup> The novel's accuracy was commented on by Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote about American women's fortitude in *It's Up to the Women* (1933),<sup>67</sup> after her visit to the Californian camps in 1940: 'I have never believed that *The Grapes of Wrath* was exaggerated'.<sup>68</sup> In the novel's inter-chapters, grappling with the realities of the Dust Bowl, Steinbeck manages to portray women as symbolically active, a portrayal which he fleshes out in the novel's main narrative.

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<sup>63</sup> Bogardus and Hobson, eds., 'Introduction', in *Literature at the Barricades*, 1-10 (p. 3).

<sup>64</sup> Cook, 'Steinbeck, the People, and the Party', 82-95 (p. 88).

<sup>65</sup> When answering a questionnaire about his own view of this novel, Steinbeck wrote that it was '[a]n attempt to write the movement of the dust bowlers to California'. See DeMott, 'Voltaire Didn't Like Anything: A 1939 Interview with John Steinbeck', in *Conversations with John Steinbeck*, ed. by Thomas Fensch (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 21-7 (pp. 23-4).

<sup>66</sup> qtd., in Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck*, 374-92 (p. 375).

<sup>67</sup> Roosevelt, *It's Up to the Women*, p. ix.

<sup>68</sup> qtd., in Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck*, 414-32 (p. 422).

### **Ma Joad: Mobilised Agency and Cooperation**

In the novel's story about the Joad family's migration to California, Steinbeck provides the fictionalised Ma Joad with speaking, leading, cooperative, and influential roles without entirely circumscribing her by gendered confines. Throughout the journey to California, Ma undertakes the cooking duty in the camps; controls her emotions with practicality and stoicism, displayed in the offering of food to ones in urgent need and the management of her family expenses; and works as a picker in the fields with the Joad men in California. Further, her orders and decisions regarding helping strangers, or the Joads acting as one group, dominate both her husband, Pa, and son, Tom; and her actions of cooperation as well as populist speeches contribute to the shaping of Tom's sense of collectivism and responsibility for the oppressed. These actions, which develop throughout the migration, release Ma from a wife's subordination and from a mother's maternal emotionality limited only to children. The novel's penultimate inter-chapter describes the migrants' work in picking cotton in California. Similar to the other fifteen segments, the inter-chapter includes fragmented facts about anonymous Dust Bowl migrants. Notably, the segment begins with the announcement 'COTTON Pickers Wanted', and closes with 'The ol' woman'll make some nice biscuits tonight, ef she ain't too tired' (557). Relating the two facts induces the conclusion that tiredness from picking cotton can release Dust Bowl women from their societally assigned domestic duties. The novel's chief narrative exposes and explores this and similar positions in the scenes where Ma Joad appears. Historian James Gregory, who argues that for Dust Bowlers '[m]ale authority and responsibility for income remained the rule',<sup>69</sup> contends that leading Dust Bowl women like Lucinda Coffman, whom he compares to Ma Joad, are "the exception" in both metropolitan and valley contexts'.<sup>70</sup> Whether Ma embodies this

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<sup>69</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 36-77 (p. 48).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

exceptionalism or what Laura Hapke terms ‘mythic’ motherhood,<sup>71</sup> by her fictionalisation Steinbeck widens the agency of the inter-chapters’ women, and, further, attempts to challenge the predominant gendered ideals in Popular Front representations of the Dust Bowl.<sup>72</sup>

The extent to which Steinbeck’s novel is female-centred is illuminated by comparison to other leftist Dust Bowl narratives, such as Edwin Howard’s ‘California’s Cotton Strike’, a 1939 essay written for the November *New Masses*. The essay, published almost six months after the appearance of *The Grapes of Wrath*, focuses on a family’s work in picking cotton and its men’s involvement in a strike. Will Dobson’s family, whose members picked cotton in California, Howard writes, ‘are part of the Steinbeck family: migratory, insecure, dispossessed workers so intensely exploited that only with the most herculean effort are they able to cling to the crag of life’.<sup>73</sup> While this family of eight members suffered like the Joads, its men joined a strike against the low pay for cotton pickers and followed their strike leader’s, Carl Patterson’s, commands. In addition, these strikers, in order to receive fair pay, join the CIO, which one of the strikers, Jim Allen, described as their ‘only hope’, recognising that they should ‘all stick together. . . that’s the only way the laborin’ man stands a chance’.<sup>74</sup> In *The Grapes of Wrath*’s story, the Joad women rather than the men represent the significance of cooperation and collectivism. Only by the novel’s last scene does Tom realise this, and never does his father show a potential towards joining a strike as Dobson did. These brief yet substantial differences between the two narratives indicate that Steinbeck strives to give centeredness, authority, and action to the Joad women. The novel’s story, like the Camera Eye in *The Big Money*, is concerned with women’s sympathetic actions and not with men’s radical activities, which Tom preaches about in his famous speech ‘Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there’ (572). This section maintains that throughout the

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<sup>71</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 71-105 (p. 72).

<sup>72</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259-82.

<sup>73</sup> Edwin Howard, ‘California Cotton’s Strike’, *New Masses* (November 1939), 16-17 (p. 16).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.



journey for California, Ma, to confront hard conditions associated with this migration, progressively frees herself from the bonds of confined motherhood and submissive wifehood, and through this progression, Steinbeck destabilises masculinist politics.

One of the journal entries Steinbeck wrote while working on the novel prioritises Ma Joad: '[m]ust take time in the description, detail, detail, looks, clothes, gestures, Ma very important'.<sup>75</sup> One of these details is that before the migration Ma's character is that of a female who masks her capabilities by conforming to societal expectations of her as a woman. For instance, when opening her personal box before leaving Oklahoma, Ma picks 'out the ring, the watch charm, [and] the earrings' and puts them in an envelope instead of the old letters she used to keep (148). Taking her trinkets, while neglecting the written documents, suggests that Ma's character before the migration is influenced by a gendered imposition, for she presumes her feminine belongings to be the things most needed in the migration to California. Even when showing her fortitude, she attaches it to femininity or domesticity. An example is when her husband and son finish slaughtering two pigs, she silently with a 'dull knife' helps Tom scrape the pigs' skins 'to take out the bristles' (143). Back in her domestic sphere, though, when her son Noah continues cutting the meat into pieces, Ma goes to pat 'the coarse salt in, laid it piece by piece in the kegs, careful that no pieces touched each other' (145). When Tom's friend Casy suggests helping her with the salting, a help she ultimately accepts, Ma is astonished: 'She stopped her work then inspected him oddly, as though he suggested a curious thing [...] "It's women's work," she said finally' (146). The acceptance of this help and her above actions introduce and foreshadow her leading attributes, which are more fully developed by the migration. Steinbeck's plan of describing minor details about Ma Joad including the 'gestures' and 'looks' points to his attempt at giving her the most

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<sup>75</sup> Steinbeck, 'Entry#17', in *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath*, ed. by Robert DeMott (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 28.

influential role in the novel. Steinbeck reminds himself in another entry, 'I want to show how valuable Ma is to society—what a waste there is'.<sup>76</sup>

As a start to this progress, Ma accepts her duty as nurturer, but she also becomes the family's leader instead of Pa or even Tom. While preparing to leave their land, Tom, the most masculine of the Joad men, asks Ma instead of Pa what to take with them. Her answer is "All the stuff to eat with" (147). While her response is a reminder of a domestic duty, the cooking, which the novel's early inter-chapters attach to women, Ma is given another chance to free herself from her past marginality and silence. More specifically, in the migration's first scene after Ma adds drops from a soothing syrup to the Joad grandfather's coffee in order to put him to sleep, Pa assigns Ma's physical sitting in the front seat next to the driver of the truck, her son Al. "Ma", announces Pa, "you an' Granma set in with Al for a while. We'll change aroun' so it's easier, but you start out that way" (155). The incident not only literally places Ma in a man's seat in the truck, but figuratively elevates her responsibilities, too. When the truck moves,

Ma tried to look back [at their homeland], but the body of the load cut off her view. She straightened her head and peered straight ahead along the dirt road. And a great weariness was in her eyes. (156)

The 'weariness' in her eyes and her looking forward from her seat in a man's position in the truck indicates a change of status for Ma, a new beginning for her and her foreshadowed separation from the past of men's sovereignty in Oklahoma.

As Edwin T. Bowden suggests, 'Ma, at the center of the family, soon becomes the accepted leader and the source of unity and confidence and will'.<sup>77</sup> The novel's narrator describes that she appears 'as remote and faultless in judgments as a goddess' (100). On several occasions, Ma judges before helping those who are in urgent need even when treating

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<sup>76</sup> Steinbeck, 'Entry #63', in *Working Days*, p. 70.

<sup>77</sup> Bowden, 'The Commonplace and The Grotesque', 15-23 (p. 17).

her family members, for the benefit of the whole group. When treating two of her children, the sick Winfield and the pregnant Rose, who are in need of milk at the same time, Ma manages her maternal emotions by first dedicating her help to Winfield, who works on the fields, and then to Rose, who is not a breadwinner at that time. Realising her daughter's need of the milk, then, after Winfield has drunk most of it, Ma 'poured the rest of the canned milk in a cup and sneaked it to Rose' (543). In the hardest moments of the migration, Ma similarly controls her emotions for the benefit of the whole family. An example is when she has not told Pa and Tom about Grampa's death. Upon their arrival to California, Ma explains to Pa and Tom the rationale behind her actions:

"I was afraid we wouldn' get acrost," she said. "I tol' Grnma we couldn' he'p her. The fambly has ta get acrost. I tol' her, tol' her when she was a-dyin'. We couldn' stop in the desert. There was the young ones—an' Rosasharn's baby. I tol' her". (311)

With emotional composure, Ma manages the position. Morris Dickstein notices this hybridity in Ma's character, and elucidates that Ma 'combines toughness, endurance, and maternal empathy'.<sup>78</sup> Barbara A. Heavilin, in the editor's column of the journal *Steinbeck Review*, similarly argues that Ma is Steinbeck's 'note of objective purity': 'Her actions, words, and gestures define her not only as the quintessential mother but also as a heroic person of great magnanimity and compassion'.<sup>79</sup> The combination of 'magnanimity and compassion' respectively corresponds to Ma's rationality and emotionality.

Ma also demonstrates the management of her emotions by the handling of her family's expenses. Apparently it is a conventional role that historian Susan Ware associates with 'the division of [gender] roles' in the 1930s wherein men are breadwinners and women are to

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<sup>78</sup> Dickstein, 'Steinbeck and the Great Depression', 111-32 (pp. 125-6).

<sup>79</sup> Heavilin, "'A note . . . of great objective purity': Steinbeck's Evocative Language of Heart and Mind in *The Grapes of Wrath*", v-x (p. v).

manage the household spending.<sup>80</sup> The sociologists Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg maintain in their study about American women's social positions that '[i]n most working-class households, the housewife was the manager of the family finances and was therefore responsible for seeing the family's limited income was used productively'.<sup>81</sup> Margaret Hagood, a 1930s sociologist researcher interested in documentation, like Steinbeck himself, uses the phrase 'emotional rationality' in her study of Southern tenant farm women to describe mothers' 'acceptance of economic hardship'.<sup>82</sup> This rationality, Hagood clarifies in her study, which appeared in the same year of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s publication, is caused by these women's directing their activities towards 'farm, children, home—rather than toward inner goals demanded by inferiority feelings or other internal maladjustments'.<sup>83</sup> Ma demonstrates this rationality during the journey for California when she judges what food to buy and who needs it most.<sup>84</sup> Practicing the idea of 'Making Do' with less,<sup>85</sup> she buys the food that is necessary to nurture her family.<sup>86</sup> This careful choice signifies her business-like rationality in making decisions for the benefit of the whole group and for those most in need.

This role is similar to the one that Steinbeck himself observed and earlier wrote about in the essays that precede and provide a backbone to *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>87</sup> Working for the *San Francisco News*, Steinbeck began his research journey with the help of Tom Collins, the manager of one of the camps,<sup>88</sup> and tried to pin down the difficulties Dust Bowl migrants encountered in Californian camps. His articles for the *News*, as Lisca maintains, 'are straightforward reports of living conditions among migrant workers, along with suggestions

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<sup>80</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (pp. 13-14).

<sup>81</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 83-106 (p. 89).

<sup>82</sup> Margaret Jarman Hagood, 1939, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 63-76 (p. 75).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>84</sup> See *Grapes*, p. 443. Also see pages 499 and 559. Ma figures out Rose's need of milk: "she ought to have milk. The lady nurse says that" (499).

<sup>85</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (p. 2).

<sup>86</sup> See *Grapes*, p. 512.

<sup>87</sup> See Wallenberg, 'Introduction', in *The Harvest Gypsies*, pp. v-vii.

<sup>88</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259- 282 (p. 266).

and appeals for a more enlightened treatment of these people'.<sup>89</sup> In these articles, Steinbeck describes men's strength in bearing the migration's plights: 'They have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong'.<sup>90</sup> These men's 'one urge and one overwhelming need', Steinbeck continues, is 'to acquire a little land again, and settle on it and stop their wandering'.<sup>91</sup> Steinbeck also sought to highlight women's fortitude and mothers' challenges in particular. He wrote about women who joined social committees like the 'Good Neighbors', which aimed at comforting the migrants during the hardest conditions of camping. This committee, Steinbeck writes, 'sees that destitution does not exist', helps migrants settle down, and takes care of children whose mothers work in the fields.<sup>92</sup> Women in this committee 'are not trained social workers, but they have what is perhaps more important, an understanding which grows from a likeness of experience. Nothing has happened to the newcomer that has not happened to the committee'.<sup>93</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath* briefly refers to this committee's chief concern of making the migrants 'feel at home', its assistance in 'pass[ing] out the charity', and its introducing women to join this Ladies' Club or to work in 'makin' dresses'.<sup>94</sup> Ma Joad embodies the cooperative qualities of these women about whom Steinbeck writes even before he planned the novel.

Working on this novel during a period of widespread interest in documentation, Steinbeck attempts to present other realities he senses to be important for conveying his message about Dust Bowlers and women like Ma. William Stott, in examining photo-text proletarian projects from the late 1930s, maintains that reportage is, like documentary photography, 'to some extent biased communication'.<sup>95</sup> Photographer Lange maintains in an introduction to

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<sup>89</sup> Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*, 144-177 (p. 145).

<sup>90</sup> Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 19-26 (p. 22).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-44 (p. 40-1).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42. See *Grapes*, p. 432f.

<sup>94</sup> See *Grapes*, pp. 426-33.

<sup>95</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 46-64 (p. 61).

*An American Exodus*, the 1939 documentary book in which she collaborated with her husband Paul Taylor, that what Taylor and she present in this project are limited facts:

We show you what is happening in selected regions of limited areas. Something is lost by this method, for it fails to show fully the wide extent and the many variations of rural changes which we describe. But we believe that the gain in sharpness of focus reveals better the nature of the changes themselves.<sup>96</sup>

Steinbeck's articles for the *News*, which appeared in the 1936 pamphlet *The Harvest Gypsies*, were re-published in 1938 in *Their Blood is Strong* which combines the novelist's essays alongside photographs by Lange.<sup>97</sup> Steinbeck seems to follow a similar pattern in his novel's inter-chapters and main narratives to explore facts about Dust Bowlers that he attempts to articulate in his project a year before *The Grapes of Wrath* by including photographs by Lange.

The facts the decade's documentary projects present are not entirely objective,<sup>98</sup> and Steinbeck's novel, according to Stott, seeks to represent the struggles of the proletariat similarly, for it aims to solve proletarian agrarian problems by intensifying its fictionalised people's resilience.<sup>99</sup> Sylvia Cook, discussing modernism in 1930s American writings, suggests that what caused the novel's popularity in the 1930s is not its subject matter. Rather, it is Steinbeck's 'skill' in using a modernist 'documentary' structure in which dialectical views about the Southern migrants are placed in different sections – the narrative and in the inter-chapters.<sup>100</sup> Jennifer A. Williamson more recently argues that some 1930s proletarian novels, including Steinbeck's, emulate late nineteenth-century 'sentimentalism' and 'moral education', through which writers depict working-class struggles in order to awaken middle-

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<sup>96</sup> Lange, 'Focus 1939', in *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion in the Thirties*. ed. by Lange and Paul Taylor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 11-15 (p. 15).

<sup>97</sup> See Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 92-153 (p. 125).

<sup>98</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, pp. 26-8.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-142 (p. 121).

<sup>100</sup> Cook, 'Steinbeck, the People, and the Party', 82-95 (p. 94).

class sympathy and, further, to reach an action for the proletariat.<sup>101</sup> Steinbeck wrote about migrant families' suffering in his essays first, and later he modifies this observation in *The Grapes of Wrath* by portraying women's rigidity to complete his view about migrants' struggles and fortitude. His sense of responsibility towards the migrants affiliated him deeply with his represented proletarians. In Dickstein's sense, by writing this novel after a reportage work about the same topic, Steinbeck attempts to catch history but also 'to humanize it into a narrative everyone could grasp and feel'.<sup>102</sup> Seeking to trigger audience identification with what he portrays, the novelist, more obviously than the photo-text projects which Stott compares to *The Grapes of Wrath*, attempts to accentuate a Dust Bowl migrant mother's significance not merely to her family but also to her wider community.

Many American women during the 1930s, as Ware affirms, held themselves together and contributed socially or politically in ways that supported their communities.<sup>103</sup> In spite of not being a trained social worker, Ma, like the camps' 'Good Neighbors', wisely offers the support she can afford.<sup>104</sup> For instance, in the first camp, after ordering her family to take their plates inside, Ma leaves some leftover food for the hungry 'circle of children' who come in when she is cooking (345). Ma here enlarges her domestic circle by enacting cooperation with destitute people. Earlier in the novel, in another example of her solidarity with strangers, she treats Casy as one of the Joads. She makes the decision regarding this man's departure for California with them:

Ma looked to Tom to speak, because he was a man, but Tom did not speak. She let him have the chance that was his right, and then she said, "Why, we'd be proud to have you. 'Course I can't say right now; Pa says all the men'll talk tonight and figger when we

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<sup>101</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 1-22 (p. 10).

<sup>102</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 92-153 (p. 135).

<sup>103</sup> Ware, *Holding their Own*, 1-20 (p. 17).

<sup>104</sup> Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 32-44 (p. 42). See *Grapes*, p. 432f.

gonna start. I guess maybe we better not say till all the men come [...] But if they's room I'm pretty sure we'll be proud to have ya." (127)

While Ma shows an acceptance of the Joad men's 'right' to decide if Casy should join the journey, she makes this decision. Pa's view, by contrast, is: "I'm wonderin' if we can all ride, an' the preacher too. An' kin we feed a extra mouth?" (139). After only 'clear[ing] her throat', which has been probably silenced for a long time in the presence of her husband, Ma comments on Pa's opinion: "It ain't kin we? It's will we?" (139). This early defence and solidarity with Casy triggers her cooperation with those in need.

The cooperative mother's image was often evoked in the decade's proletarian novels to problematise political or spiritual ideals. In Conroy's *The Disinherited*, as examined in Chapter Two, Larry's mother's feeding of an African American strike breaker and preaching to him against scabbing make her comparable to Mother Jones and, further, distinguishes her from self-sacrificing working-class mothers. Johnson's *Now in November* reflects on the struggles that a middle-class family, the Haldemarnes, encounters due to a drought in Missouri, during which a middle-class mother, Willa, who ultimately dies in a field fire, often shares things with those in need. When her family's farm produces extra cherries that cannot all be sold in the markets, Willa teaches her three daughters, "Give them away [...] Better than swelling the jays and worms" (NN, 15). As Williamson writes about this novel, 'Willa's sympathy prompts her to advocate charity', thus reflects her endorsement of 'humanist philosophy—the idealized communist spirit'.<sup>105</sup> While Ma Joad also reflects this sentiment when interacting with the children and Casy, the fact that she neither sacrifices her life like Willa nor teases out political ideas like Larry's mother propels her into a populist rather than radicalised or spiritualised maternal role.

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<sup>105</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 59-86 (p. 72; 74).



Ma's character is also in certain respects masculinised, and feminist historian Leslie Woodcock Tentler's description of the role of the working-class mother helps illuminate this dimension:

The mother was always the more authoritative parent in many working-class families and held the family together emotionally as well; ultimately, she made most of the decisions that governed child-rearing.<sup>106</sup>

For the protection and unity of her family, Ma practices authority over both Tom and Pa. At Tom's suggestion that the family depart without him, for instance, she speaks sharply and behaves strangely:

“what you mean, you ain't gonna go? You got to go. You got to look after the family.”

Pa was amazed at the revolt. Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily. “I ain't a-gonna go,” she said. (229-30)

The unexpected 'revolt' here indicates a change in Ma's character. Williamson contends that 'Steinbeck draws Ma Joad as a domestic authority who moves beyond maternal caretaking to occupy male spaces and take on masculine authority'.<sup>107</sup> Like Coffman, the exceptional leading Dust Bowler who is comparable to her,<sup>108</sup> Ma gradually becomes her family's leader. Her sentimentality as a working-class mother, therefore, is masculinised but not politicised in the same way Conroy and Johnson portray their literary mothers, neither of whom, notably, leave Missouri.

During the migration to California, Ma expresses her ideas and gives decisions concerning her family's position. On their arrival in California, she decides the family should go to Marysville, where the family men can get work picking fruit: “I don' care what the price is. We're a-goin'” (479). Her being in California gives her the chance to speak

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<sup>106</sup> Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 136-179 (p. 178).

<sup>107</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism*, 87-111 (p. 109).

<sup>108</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 36-77 (p. 48).

accordingly, releasing her from gendered expectations. Robert and Helen Lynd maintain in a 1937 sociological study, that in Muncie, Indiana, during the 1930s, '[m]en's and women's roles have in some cases been reversed, with the woman taking a job at whatever money she could earn and the man caring for household and children'.<sup>109</sup> Although this change occasionally occurred, the Lynds write, '[h]omemaking continues to be women's chief occupation'.<sup>110</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath's* early inter-chapters indicate that the anonymous female Dust Bowlers continue to cook for their families even while camping in California and as their husbands' role as breadwinners and custodians falters. As Dickstein observes, California in this novel represents 'a betrayal of the utopian dreams that have been invested in it'.<sup>111</sup> Utopian dreams, like men's chances of decent work opportunities in this figuratively promised land, shatter in *The Grapes of Wrath* for its male characters barely find employment and they received low payments once working as pickers. Once the Joad men are migrants rather than breadwinners in California, Ma finds a space to formulate her identity as a more assertive woman.

Obviously, more active than women of the novel's inter-chapters, Ma expresses her wrath until she eventually threatens and marginalises Pa's presence. Initially, in California she gives the Joad men commands: to find a place of residence and to 'get work an' settle down'.<sup>112</sup> Upon hearing such a command from his wife,

Pa sniffled. "Seemed like time is changed", he said sarcastically. "Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick". (481)

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<sup>109</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (London, Constable, 1937), 144-203 (p. 178).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>111</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 92-153 (p. 140).

<sup>112</sup> *Grapes*, pp. 332, 328, and 478.

Ma's response to this speech, while exhibiting a gradual shift in gender roles, also reveals her acknowledgment that Pa might whip her. In spite of this threat, she openly enunciates her opinion:

“But you ain't a-doin' your job, either a-thinkin' or a-workin'. If you was, why, you could use your stick, an' women folks'd sniffle their nose an' creep-mouse aroun'. But you jus' get you a stick now an' you ain't lickin' no woman; you're a-fightin', 'cause I got a stick all laid out too”. (481)

Ma's rebuke here becomes her grapes of wrath, for she responds back to a husband who lacks a work opportunity and who considers whipping her. Her expressed wrath enables her further to manage plans for her family's survival while in California.

It is as if Ma's dominance replaces that of her husband. '[T]he male role' in this novel, argues Peter Lisca, 'deprived of its breadwinner status, loses also its authority'.<sup>113</sup> Writing on a wider context, Mintz and Kellogg explain that men's loss of the breadwinning role 'often significantly lowered the status of the husband within the family and undermined his role as a primary decision maker',<sup>114</sup> and this can explain the transformation in Ma's character while the family is in California. McElvaine suggests that American society was somehow feminised in the 1930s, for '[t]he self-centered, aggressive, competitive “male” ethic of the 1920s was discredited. Men who lost their jobs became dependent in ways that women had been thought to be'.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, some women 'adopt so-called masculine values'.<sup>116</sup> A. H. Maslow, in a 1939 psychoanalytic article, positively analyses the potential

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<sup>113</sup> Lisca, 'The Grapes of Wrath: An Achievement of Genius', in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath*, 48-62 (p. 57).

<sup>114</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 133-149 (p. 138). Men's unemployment during the Depression 'deeply affected family structure', for the unemployed men had 'found their position destroyed in the occupational world and their authority challenged in the home'. See Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby, eds., 'The Depression', *America's Working Women*, p. 241.

<sup>115</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 323-49 (p. 340).

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341.

of dominant women and their aim at self fulfilment,<sup>117</sup> and regards the ‘masculine and feminine labels’ as societal strictures placed ‘on various human traits’.<sup>118</sup> Betty Friedan, who was a labour journalist in the 1940s, points out in her 1963 feminist study, *The Feminine Mystique*, that Maslow in this article has not widened the scope of women’s fulfilment beyond the domestic sphere.<sup>119</sup> Friedan regards Maslow’s and similar views from the 1930s, which associate women’s fulfilment to their sexual or nurturing maternal roles, as promoting what she calls ‘the feminine mystique [which] prevented women from realising their human potential by locking them into domestic prisons’, housewifery and motherhood.<sup>120</sup> Steinbeck, a contemporary of both Maslow and Friedan, neither fosters nor dismantles this mystique. Instead, he takes an ambiguous position exemplified in his representation of Ma as her family’s leader in California.

Steinbeck planned while working on the novel to pay attention to details including ‘gestures’ when portraying Ma,<sup>121</sup> and it seems that he also draws on a psychoanalytic discourse concerning dominant women. It is potentially difficult for a male writer to imagine women’s radical agency within a Dust Bowl context, so it seems that the psychoanalytic analysis of women within the society structure, like that offered by Maslow, is more plausible for Steinbeck. In accord with Maslow’s analysis of dominant women, Steinbeck portrays Ma in a category wherein women ‘prefer to be independent [...] and generally do not care for concessions that imply they are inferior, weak, or that they need special attention and cannot take care of themselves’.<sup>122</sup> Steinbeck narrates Ma in ways that fit the type Maslow

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<sup>117</sup> See Ronald L. Podeschi and Phyllis Podeschi, ‘Abraham Maslow: On the Potential of Women’, *Educational Horizons* 52. 2 (Winter 1973-74), 61-64 (p. 63).

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>119</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 197-223 (p. 206).

<sup>120</sup> Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*, 1-15 (p.3).

<sup>121</sup> Steinbeck, ‘Entry #63’, p. 70.

<sup>122</sup> A. H. Maslow, ‘Dominance, Personality and Social Behavior in Women’, *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10.1 (1939), 3-39 (p. 13).

delineates. Ma, ignoring societal concessions, openly and eloquently speaks to Pa about her previously repressed recognition of women's capabilities:

“An’ that’s one more thing a woman knows. I noticed that. Man, he lives in jerks—baby born an’ a man dies, an’ that’s a jerk—gets a farm an’ loses his farm, an’ that’s a jerk. Woman, it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that. We ain’t gonna die out. People is goin’ on—chargin’ alittle, maybe, but goin’ right on”. (577)

She, further, proclaims, “Women can change better’n a man [...] Woman got all her life in her arms” (577). Ma associates women's potential with the continuity of giving and the will to cause a change in others' lives, thus overthrowing her past subordination to a husband who is no longer the breadwinner.

Ma's voice also triggers Tom's populist spirit at the climax of the journey. When Tom is angry at armed men who tell him that ‘strangers’ from Southern plains are not allowed to work in a place called Tulare in California, Ma, clinging to her son's arm so he does not get into a fight with these men, gives him a figuratively collective talk:

“You got to have patience. Why, Tom- us people will go on livin’ when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we’re the people that live. They ain’t gonna wipe us out. Why, we’re the people—we go on”. (383)

Rhetoric like this about ‘people’ and their will as a group to endure harsh conditions was common in the leftist culture after the mid-thirties.<sup>123</sup> In 1936, as the dawning Popular Front era encouraged a cultural turn from radicalism toward progressivism,<sup>124</sup> appeared *The People*, Yes, Carl Sandburg's long poem wherein its author, despite his break from radical politics,

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<sup>123</sup> Michael Kazin maintains in the historical study *The Populist Persuasion* that populism characterises the Popular Front after the middle of the thirties, which even the Communist Party members wanted their labour movement to embrace at that time (151), and it means having faith in people's capacity (163).

<sup>124</sup> Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 310-18 (p. 313).

‘preaches unity and solidarity of all oppressed against their victimizers’.<sup>125</sup> People, as cultural historians have noted, become the focus of Popular Front culture. In a *New Masses* essay entitled ‘The People, Yes’, Samuel Sillen writes, ‘The People [...] are the heroes of our most gratifying books’.<sup>126</sup> Warren I. Susman contends that after 1935, ‘there was one phrase, one sentiment, one special call on the emotions that appeared everywhere in America popular language: the people’.<sup>127</sup> Denning, who regards ‘populism’ as one of the features that supports this culture’s proletarian topicality, highlights that “‘The people” became the central trope of left culture in this period, the imagined ground of political and cultural activity, the rhetorical sake in ideological battle. The cultural front imagined itself as a “people’s culture”’.<sup>128</sup> Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Denning suggests in a chapter specifically about Dust Bowl narratives, ‘is not a true exemplar of the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies of the Popular Front’.<sup>129</sup> The novel, Denning explains, follows epic rather than ‘picaresque’ narrative form and so represents the migration journey as a mythical proletarian struggle that its people encounter.<sup>130</sup> Through this representation, though, the novel’s narrative uses the Popular Front’s strain of populist rhetoric to restrain rather than arouse its male characters’ militant resistance. And this is affirmed by Ma’s populist talk about people’s – rather than men’s or radicals’ – strong will for facing their own conditions.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, argues Alan M. Wald, ‘[l]ike much of the Popular Front ethos [...] tends to be fuzzy about long-term solutions, blending ideas of reform and revolution, and to give special emphasis to the “Americanness”’, for it demonstrates radicalism by relating ‘patriotic themes’ to ‘a Left view point’.<sup>131</sup> On the other hand, according to Warren French,

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<sup>125</sup> Brian M. Reed, ‘Carl Sandburg’s The People, Yes, Thirties Modernism, and the Problem of Bad Political Poetry’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 46.2 (Summer 2004), 181-212 (p. 199).

<sup>126</sup> qtd., in Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115-160 (p. 124).

<sup>127</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 150-83 (p. 212).

<sup>128</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115-160 (p. 124).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 259-82 (p. 259).

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>131</sup> Wald, ‘Steinbeck and the Proletarian Novel’, 671-85 (pp. 676- 677).

the novel carries ‘Jeffersonian’ agrarian rather than Communist Party principles, and accordingly it excludes political communist propaganda, and rather reflects ‘important patterns of social and economic thinking in the thirties’.<sup>132</sup> The political philosopher Richard Rorty argues that novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* encourage hope in achieving a classless American society wherein everyone has equal work and life opportunities.<sup>133</sup> However, this American dream as a solution to proletarian struggles is problematised in the novel, for the represented migrants experience poverty and hunger in California. In *The Disinherited*, which also dismantles this dream, Mother ultimately declares to her son Larry the necessity of having strike organisers like his father to fight for the proletariat. Steinbeck’s novel, published six-years later, despite its reference to strike activities led by Casy who functions like the German radical Hans in Conroy’s novel, brings to the fore Ma Joad’s eventual populist assertion, her collective voice and controlling personality. The story about Ma starkly contrasts with Howard’s radical anecdote in his 1939 *New Masses* essay about Dust Bowl men’s striking against the low pay received for working in the cotton fields.<sup>134</sup> Ma who becomes her family’s ‘nucleus of order’,<sup>135</sup> is instrumental in rather than apart from Tom’s evolution into becoming a mouthpiece for reform, revolution, and collectivism.

In this novel, Wald suggests, women ‘can be tough and independent, providing leadership as commanding as that of any male, yet are profoundly committed to the family, even as the family itself embodies a kind of extended proletarian community’.<sup>136</sup> While Ma is committed to unifying her family, she decides that Tom has to leave the cotton field to join revolutionary

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<sup>132</sup> French, *The Social Novel at the End of an Era*, 42-86 (pp. 47-8; 50).

<sup>133</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 3-38 (p. 8).

<sup>134</sup> See Howard, ‘California Cotton’s Strike’, 16-17 (p. 16).

<sup>135</sup> Lisca, ‘*The Grapes of Wrath*: An Achievement of Genius’, p. 57.

<sup>136</sup> Wald, ‘Steinbeck and the Proletarian Novel’, p. 677.

activities after the police look for him for killing the cop who murdered Casy.<sup>137</sup> Only to her, further, does Tom disclose his speech about supporting oppressed people:

“Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there [...]’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready [...] God, I’m talking like Casy. Comes of thinking about him so much”. (572)

Shortly before being assassinated by the police for organising a union against the low payment received for working in the cotton fields, Casy encourages Tom to “tell the folks in there how it is [...] Tell ’em they’re starvin’ us an’ stabbin’ theirselves in the back” (523). Notably, a similar exchange takes place by the close of Conroy’s novel when Hans asks Larry to speak after the return of Ben’s farm, a speech that leads to Larry’s assertion, ‘I thought happily that I must have inherited some of my father’s gift’ (*TD*, 282). Larry’s attributing the gift of having a kind heart and agitating goals to his father is not unlike Tom relating his climactic speech to Casy, thus indicating these two male characters’ reflection of masculinist attitudes. Grappling with these visions, however, Tom’s talk, like Larry’s about the gift he inherits, markedly echoes Ma’s literal help to ones in need outside her family’s circle, like when feeding the camp’s hungry children and allowing Casy to travel with the Joads. The resonance between Ma’s actions and Tom’s speech here manifests Ma’s contribution to the shaping of Tom’s class-conscious exhibited in his radical as well as reformative speech addressed to her.

Richard H. Pells observes the decline in preaching radicalism in the novels published after 1935.<sup>138</sup> About *The Grapes of Wrath* in particular, Pells writes that this novel ‘was not really a political novel at all. In the end it is not Tom’s conversion to action that lingers in the

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<sup>137</sup> See *Grapes*, pp. 563, 568.

<sup>138</sup> Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 310-18.



mind but Ma Joad's innate capacity to confront every misfortune with courage and honor'.<sup>139</sup> French, who also regards the novel as a reflection of social rather than Communist Party political attitudes, notes its focus on 'the necessity of each individual's educating and reforming himself, rather than the causes of a national disaster'.<sup>140</sup> Like a synthesis to these two views, Rorty earlier argues that the 'new, quasi-communitarian rhetoric' in this novel 'was at the heart of the Progressive Movement and the New Deal', the former of which was a movement led by poets such as Whitman.<sup>141</sup> Bettering the lives of the 'common man', farmers, the poor and unemployed were the main concerns of the New Deal programs,<sup>142</sup> and, notably, Roosevelt often invoked Lincoln's name when speaking about the programs.<sup>143</sup> Steinbeck's novel alludes neither to Whitman nor to Lincoln whose name was mythically connected to progressivism in Popular Front America.<sup>144</sup> Instead, the novel hints at Emerson's philosophy on the 'one soul which animates all men',<sup>145</sup> a sentiment that Casy declares early on when he remarks, "all men got one big soul ever' body's a part of" (33). Steinbeck's turning to this credo about people's 'one big soul' suggests an attempt at evading or complicating masculinist proletarian politics. The populist speech Ma gives, in addition to her acts of cooperation, exemplifies this tendency: it prefigures the rhetoric Tom ultimately proclaims about defending the oppressed. Via this indirect connectedness between Ma's and Tom's roles, the novel inclines towards suppressing gendered norms calling for men's radical activities to fight Dust Bowl struggles.

Two Popular Front texts adapted from *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1940 tend to emphasise these masculinist politics. The final scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* movie, for

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 202- 218 (p. 218).

<sup>140</sup> French, *The Social Novel at the End of an Era*, 42-86 (p. 44).

<sup>141</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 3-38 (p. 8).

<sup>142</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 442).

<sup>143</sup> Abbott, *The Exemplary Presidency*, 3-21 (p. 10; 20); Jones, 'The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era', pp. 710-724.

<sup>144</sup> See Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-463 (p. 448).

<sup>145</sup> Emerson, 'The American Scholar', 43-59 (p. 56).

instance, which closes with Ma's key speech, 'we're the people—we go on',<sup>146</sup> does not show Tom for he has left to turn his speech about supporting the oppressed into actions. Even Dust Bowl migrant and songwriter Woody Guthrie,<sup>147</sup> who read Steinbeck's novel and saw the movie based on it, writes a ballad under the title 'Tom Joad', arguing that the purpose from this song is to let poor 'people' in Oklahoma, who could not afford to buy the novel or watch the movie, know about Casy's preaching.<sup>148</sup> The song, obviously, closes with Tom and the stanza 'Wherever little children are hungry and crying/[...]/ That's where I'm a-gonna be'.<sup>149</sup> As Denning notes, the heart of this song is 'the itinerant outlaw/organizer, Tom Joad'.<sup>150</sup> Even while both texts, the song as well as the movie, and the Progressive Movement and the New Deal foreground masculinist concerns, in Steinbeck's novel – neither a Third Period novel nor a Popular Front text celebrating gendered paradigms – Ma's populist speech and actions precede the talk Tom gives about helping ones in need. Her character is a spurring to man's communal attitudes and, therefore, an attempted evasion to masculinist politics.

Ma's silent moments demonstrate this evasion, too, for her body language characterises her as being above speeches and actions. Initially, her character resembles that of the statically photographed mother in 'Migrant Mother' (1936). By pairing Steinbeck's Ma and Lange's photographed woman, I do not suggest that this photograph or its iconography directly influences Steinbeck. However, Steinbeck's attempt to portray a maternal Dust Bowler is similar to Lange's photography of the migrant mother, for some of Lange's photographs appeared in Steinbeck's *Their Blood is Strong* a year before *The Grapes of*

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<sup>146</sup> See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259-82 (p. 266).

<sup>147</sup> See *Ibid.*, 496-521.

<sup>148</sup> John Greenway, ed., *American Folksongs of Protest*, 243-310 (p. 289).

<sup>149</sup> Woody Guthrie, 'Tom Joad', in *American Folksongs of Protest*, p. 289-291 (p. 291).

<sup>150</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259-82 (p. 271).

*Wrath's* publication. Notably, in one of the scenes in the novel, Ma, while in a Californian government camp,

sat on a box and put her elbows on her knees and her chin in her cupped hands. She saw the movement in the camp, heard the voices of the children, the hammering of an iron rim; but her eyes were staring ahead of her. (440)

The quotation, while obviously describing Ma, also accurately describes the mother in Lange's photograph. While both Ma and Lange's subject are pondering and their eyes, to utilise Steinbeck's words about Ma, are 'staring ahead of' them, Ma's children are old enough not to be on her lap or huddling around her as Lange's subject's children are. This substantial difference in the two women's circumstances gives Ma Joad a wider space to detach herself from a sentimentalised mother's domesticity, free-role agency, and limited emotionality shown in Lange's 'Migrant Mother'.

Ma's characterisation is a shift to the Dust Bowl female static and silent position which is portrayed, as examined in the previous section, in the novel's late inter-chapters and here in Lange's photograph. Stott argues, in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, that the people whom Lange photographed 'have an emotional complexity, an ambiguity, that breaks their stereotype and makes us look again', and he suggests that in 'Migrant Mother', Florence 'almost *smiles* with anxiety'.<sup>151</sup> David Peeler writes that Lange wanted to show her photographed subjects as 'victims' who 'were also repositories of the courage and strength that would enable America to endure the Depression'.<sup>152</sup> However, resolution to the problems shown in the decade's photography is questionable, according to Peeler: the photographers expose the suffering of their photographed people but rarely did they suggest solutions to alleviate it.<sup>153</sup> Dickstein makes a similar commentary on the decade's documentary

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<sup>151</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 213-239 (p. 229).

<sup>152</sup> Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet*, 57-88 (p. 69).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

photography: ‘The migrant pictures [...] are all about going nowhere; the people are pinned like social specimens, frozen into postures that allow little movement, no escape’.<sup>154</sup> Novels like *The Grapes of Wrath*, on the other hand, tend to allow little transformation to their characters’ positions. Steinbeck’s novel attempts to counter views regarding migrant mothers as helpless. Whether she was written as an intentional allusion to Lange’s Florence Thompson or not, Ma Joad can be read as a response to photographs such as ‘Migrant Mother’. Ma is not static like Lange’s photograph, for she translates her silent contemplation into action. The novel, then, exemplifies what Janet Casey argues about female-authored proletarian agrarian novels contemporary of Steinbeck’s novel that manage to break the tradition of associating women’s agency with their performance of conventional tasks (like being helpmates in agrarian contexts).<sup>155</sup> This secondary task of being next to farm partners appears in the novel’s early inter-chapters. Yet, this role is challenged by Ma’s actions and speeches, which act in dynamic, direct contrast to Florence’s frozen posture. This is Steinbeck’s attempt to evade gendered politics within his novel’s context.

One of the final changes in Ma’s character is exemplified by her work in the fields of Marysville as a picker with the Joad men,<sup>156</sup> alongside her performance of domestic chores in the camps. In his essays about migrants in California Camps, wherein he argues the key role of the Good Neighbours Club’s women, Steinbeck pays attention to the challenges working mothers encountered. He wrote:

There is no parental care of the mothers whatever, and no possibility of such care. They must work in the fields until they are physically unable or, if they do not work, the care of the other children and of the camp will not allow the prospective mother any rest.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 342-407 (p. 360).

<sup>155</sup> Casey, ‘Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women’s Progressive Fiction’, 96-117 (p. 100).

<sup>156</sup> See *Grapes*, p. 508.

<sup>157</sup> *The Harvest Gypsies*, 45-51 (p. 50).

Ma Joad combines two duties, too, the picking and the cooking. Paula Rabinowitz, in her study of proletarian representations in the decade's photo-text documentary projects, writes that the working woman 'is insufficiently gendered and inappropriately classed. Not fully feminine because she works, neither is she a worker, because she does women's work. Her body is a site of the dual labor of productivity and reproduction'.<sup>158</sup> In addition to embodying this duality, which is indicated in the novel's inter-chapter 'COTTON Pickers Wanted' (557), Ma's character changes until she acts like a rational mother, a leading woman, a populist helper and talker, and finally a picker with migrant rather than farm men. Her representation, therefore, is neither as confined as that of the inter-chapters' women or as static as Lange's Florence nor sentimentalised like that of the typical self-sacrificing working-class mother. Steinbeck, thus, attempts to violate the masculinist vision that the working woman is a mere helpmate in an agrarian context and of the Popular Front's cultural norm of minimising women's activity for the proletariat.

### **Rose of Sharon: Gradual Inheritance of Ma's Features**

By revising Dust Bowl facts that he himself had observed and written about, John Steinbeck brings to the forefront women like Ma Joad. 'At the end of the novel', writes Warren Motley, 'Steinbeck preserves some hope, however, by insisting that Ma Joad's legacy passes to Rose of Sharon, to Tom, and, by extension, to a future generation of Americans that might incorporate her values into democratic society'.<sup>159</sup> To Motley, Ma has bequeathed her collective mentality to Tom and her maternal social emotionality, the rationalised help of strangers, to Rose.<sup>160</sup> These intellectual and passionate legacies affirm Ma's domestic and

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<sup>158</sup> Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 56-106 (p. 67).

<sup>159</sup> Motley, 'Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad's Role in *The Grapes of Wrath*', 397-412 (p. 411).

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

non-domestic tendencies, but also anticipate Rose's embodiment of the two features. Ma triumphs in freeing herself from her past domesticity, and she aspires for Rose to follow in her steps. While she asks for Rose's help in household management, she also takes her to a dancing event, a popular means of 'Collective escape and entertainment'.<sup>161</sup> By the end of the novel, Rose decides to work in picking cotton, and, further, acquires a symbolically cooperative, non-traditional role – the nursing of the starving stranger after the stillbirth of her child, which Ma indirectly influences and wordlessly encourages. What is more, Rose's still birth releases her from the bond of maternity. The current section of this thesis examines this dynamic representation of Rose in addition to her symbolised agency.

Through her traditional marriage to Connie and her subsequent pregnancy, Rose, at the beginning of the migration, acquiesces to the demands of wifehood. As an example, when departing Oklahoma and being in the rear of the truck with her husband, Rose accepts Connie's sexual advances, a silent position that turns her at this moment into an object of her husband's desire (130; 175). Even after Connie deserts her and she is pregnant with his child, Rose's 'whole thought and action were directed inward on the baby. She balanced on her toes now, for the baby's sake. And the whole world was pregnant to her; she thought only in terms of reproduction and motherhood' (130). Here, Rose is associated with the domestic, a position that gradually shifts in later scenes. Paula Rabinowitz discusses the representation of mothers in the the decade's female-authored radical novels (for example, *The Girl*). She argues that in such novels, which connect gender to class issues, the swelling of the mother's body during pregnancies and the merging between the mother and her child at that stage figures a change in the proletariat's position through revolution and 'the collective solidarity of struggle'.<sup>162</sup> While Rose passes literally through the swelling experience when she is pregnant, her aims are personal. As a first step in helping her to mature, though, Ma vocally

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<sup>161</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 215-310 (p. 233).

<sup>162</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 63-96 (p. 82).

introduces her to the idea of redirecting her attention: “forget that baby for a minute. He’ll take care a hisself” (178). When Granma gets sick, similarly, Ma talks about the necessity of moving one’s interests from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’, and to Rose she explains: “dyin’ is a piece of all dyin’, and bearin’ is a piece of all bearin’, an’ bearin’ and dyin’ is two pieces of the same thing. An’ then things ain’t lonely anymore” (286). These speeches mitigate Rose’s anxieties; they are attempts in expanding her personal compass.

In the scenes taking place in the California camps, Ma further calls upon Rose to do household chores:

Ma went on firmly, “You git aholt on yaself. They’s a lot of us here [...] Come here now an’ peel some potatoes. You’re feelin’ sorry for yaself [...] You take this here knife an’ get to them potatoes.” (366)

The rational-emotional procedure here is crucial: through her encouragement of Rose to perform these chores, Ma successfully passes on her own desire for solidarity starting with the immediate family. This correlation between Ma influencing Rose to come out of herself and care about others reveals a layer in the novel: women’s cooperation in hard conditions releases them from binding domesticity and, further, introduces them to the sphere of saving others’ lives. The novel, published during an era known for its journalists’ and photographers’ commitment to representing the suffering of the proletariat to the public,<sup>163</sup> finds in symbolism a medium to convey this message. David Peeler maintains that the decade’s artists and writers ‘sought some escape from the pain’, by depicting what they feel is important to show,<sup>164</sup> and even sentimentalising realities seeking to help the destitute.<sup>165</sup> Peeler further argues that the decade’s social novelists ‘leveled their protests about the present and hoped for brighter days to come. No author better illustrates this than John

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<sup>163</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, pp. 92-110.

<sup>164</sup> Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet*, 1-12 (p. 3).

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Steinbeck'.<sup>166</sup> Stott also maintains that proletarian fiction, which is documentary and of which *The Grapes of Wrath* is an exemplar, presents social problems as 'remediable [issues that] can be changed by human initiative'.<sup>167</sup> Steinbeck's novel offers Ma's and Rose's initiative as a remedy for Dust Bowl struggles, but often in a notably figurative way.

Two years earlier in *Of Mice and Men* (1937), a fictional narrative about agrarian tenant workers, Steinbeck uses symbolism to offer an encoded politicised vision. The novel compares workers to bulls and horses to indicate how society mistreats them. Meanwhile, it compares Curley's wife, a middle-class female protagonist, who ends up being smothered in the big hands of a worker, Lennie, to the mice and the puppy that Lennie previously and unintentionally has killed.<sup>168</sup> By this ironic analogy between humans and animals, to which the novel's title points, Steinbeck embeds a message about social injustice. Kenneth Burke argues in a 1941 study that works like *The Grapes of Wrath* utilise symbolic levels, which can be classified into three categories: biological (images about natural elements), personal (familial imagery), and abstract (images about one's enrolment within a class).<sup>169</sup> Burke explains that the drought in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, functions on a symbolic biological level. Alfred Kazin, another critic contemporary of Steinbeck, argues that 'Steinbeck's people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do'.<sup>170</sup> Kazin continues that in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck, who was 'a humanist' with no political affiliation, 'was aroused by the man-made evil the Okies had to suffer, and he knew it as something remediable by men'.<sup>171</sup> The novel describes the dehumanised treatments that Dust Bowl migrants (including the fictionalised Joads) frequently encountered in California. Thus,

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 156-164 (p. 156).

<sup>167</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 18-25 (p. 21).

<sup>168</sup> After her death, 'the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She [Curley's wife] was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young' (*OM*, 160-1).

<sup>169</sup> See Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton: Louisiana State UP, 1967), pp. 36-7.

<sup>170</sup> Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 363-399 (p. 394).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 396.



for example, during their migration the anonymous Dust Bowlers of the novel's inter-chapters are said to have 'crawled out like bugs' along the highways in their cars (273), which suggests that migration shakes the humanity of these people. With its interlocked narratives, the novel heightens the use of symbolism to signify populist inclinations related to Ma's and Rose's activity during the Dust Bowl.

An example of these signified inclinations is these two women's attending a dancing event upon their arrival at a government camp. Ma takes Rose to this popular and populist activity, which the fictionalised camp organises weekly, and this act indicates a potential towards triggering Rose's energy, sense of optimism, and togetherness. Although one of the camp's women warns Rose that she might lose her baby if she dances, Ma's decision is:

“We're going to that dance, an' we're a-gonna set there an' watch. If anybody says to come dance—why, I'll say you ain't strong enough. I'll say you're poorly. An' you can hear the music an' all like that”. (461)

The inter-chapter that proceeds this scene establishes a wider context: ‘The migrant people, scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement’ (444). The dancing event here is intended to entertain and make the audience forget about their struggles, albeit temporally. Morris Dickstein, examining movies, radio programs, songs, dances and documentary writings from the third decade, writes that such activities offered a dual purpose: ‘Collective escape and entertainment’.<sup>172</sup> Indeed, these artistic forms of expression were not directly able to change the pressing social circumstances.<sup>173</sup> They have the potential, nevertheless, to transform their audience's understandings of their real world and of how to live in it, and Dickstein argues this by using the figurative phrase ‘dancing in the dark’.<sup>174</sup> These artistic

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<sup>172</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 215-310 (p. 233).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 522-530 (p. 530).

means and their attempt of doing ‘much to ease the national trauma’, Dickstein writes, are ‘magical’, like ‘dancing in the dark’, for in the darkness of the Depression, they provided brightness in people’s lives.<sup>175</sup> Steinbeck’s novel functions similarly. It traces Dust Bowl hard conditions, but also shows Ma symbolically deflecting some of them, like when she takes Rose to watch a dance that provides a collective entertainment and a figurative escape.

This exact scene wherein Rose ‘can hear the music an’ all like that’ functions as what Dickstein calls ‘dancing in the dark’, for it is an attempt to establish an escape for a female Dust Bowler (461). Rose does not dance, but symbolically she is spurred to carry a cooperative responsibility that can be compared to Harriett’s financing of her nephew’s education in *Not Without Laughter*, examined in Chapter One. Exactly before anticipating that Rose will give birth soon, Ma, affirming her liberty from previous models of femininity and passing on some of her features to her daughter, gives Rose her own ‘gold earrings’, signifying feminine maturity for Rose (483). Rose asks if wearing the earrings before giving birth means something, and Ma says, “‘Course it does”, without explaining the reason (484). This scene is similar to one in Hughes’ novel, which also includes an exchange of jewellery. The scene, which masks political meanings that Harriett professionally encodes by her dancing and blues singing, refers to Harriett’s pawned watch, which her mother returns to her in Sandy’s presence to foreshadow Sandy’s future education, which is dependent on Harriett’s financial support. Steinbeck seems to find in the symbolism of jewellery, as Hughes does before him, a medium to indicate women’s proletarian agency. Once Ma gives her trinket to Rose, she inspires her daughter, like Hager does for Harriett with the return of the watch, to figuratively become a giving woman instead of keeping her personal possessions for herself. Rose, therefore, is introduced into a wider arena wherein giving surpasses individualised concerns.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 530.

In one of the last of his articles written for the *News*, Steinbeck suggests cooperative solutions. Furthermore, he considers resisting Fascism, the fundamental concern of the Popular Front coalition,<sup>176</sup> to be the answer to the migration and its associated problems.<sup>177</sup>

Steinbeck explains,

Fascist methods are more numerous, more powerfully applied and more openly practiced in California than any place in the United States. It will require a militant and watchful organization of middle-class people, workers, teachers, craftsmen and liberals to fight this encroaching social philosophy, and to maintain this state in a democratic form of government.<sup>178</sup>

Steinbeck here advocates fighting Fascism despite later, in a 1939 letter, acknowledging the difficulty of understanding ‘Stalinist, Hitlerite, Democrat, [and] capitalist confusion’.<sup>179</sup>

Kazin writes that Steinbeck ‘does not appeal to the hatred of Hitlerism, no; he has never appealed to any hatred’.<sup>180</sup> The novelist, instead, appeals in his proletarian essays, which came after the mid-1930s, to helping working-class people.

Markedly, the anti-fascist solution in his articles follows his overview of two mothers’ desperate situations in the camps,<sup>181</sup> and this also suggests a rejection of the anti-feminist slogan of Fascism, announced by the British Fascist Oswald Mosley, calling for ‘men who are men and women who are women’.<sup>182</sup> While the main goal of the Popular Front mode,

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<sup>176</sup> It is worthy to note that Fascism, the early twentieth-century radical non-democratic philosophy which the CPUSA feared its spread from Europe to America, railed against women’s presence in the workforce. It stifled women’s liberty and limited their roles to a domestic circle. See Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-63 (p. 442); Alexander De Grand, ‘Women Under Italian Fascism’ *The Historical Journal* 19.4 (1976), pp. 947-68.

<sup>177</sup> Among Steinbeck’s suggestions are leasing the migrants land to establish their farms, offering more information about available job vacancies and their planned wages, and encouraging the agricultural workers’ self-management by having their own organisations to address their concerns (*The Harvest Gypsies*, pp. 58-60). See Harland S. Nelson, ‘Steinbeck’s Politics Then and Now’, *The Antioch Review*, 27.1 (Spring 1967), 118-33 (p. 121).

<sup>178</sup> *The Harvest Gypsies*, 58-62 (pp. 61-2).

<sup>179</sup> Steinbeck, letter, ‘To Carlton Sheffield’, in *Steinbeck Life in Letters*, 193-4 (p. 194).

<sup>180</sup> Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 363-399 (p. 399).

<sup>181</sup> *The Harvest Gypsies*, 26-31 (p. 30).

<sup>182</sup> qtd. in, Lisa Regan, ‘Men Who Are Men and Women Who Are Women’: Fascism, Psychology and Feminist Resistance in the Work of Winifred Holtby’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2005), p. 5.

adopted by the American Communist Party after 1935, was to undermine Fascism,<sup>183</sup> it did not ignore the implication of this slogan about the necessity of having *women who are women*. Efforts to address and solve women's issues were marginalised, Denning argues, within the context of Popular Front culture due to the emphasis on working-class concerns.<sup>184</sup> Steinbeck's essays suggest solutions for the migrants without specifically addressing what feminists call the 'woman question'.<sup>185</sup> Yet, the essays sentimentalise pregnant women's and mothers' positions,<sup>186</sup> and even consider Fascism as an 'encroaching social philosophy' that should be combatted.<sup>187</sup> Steinbeck here evolves his populist solutions, which can release proletariat people, including women, from agrarian struggles and confined roles.

*The Grapes of Wrath* finds a solution of sorts in Rose's cooperation with her family and those who are in need. Rose firstly accepts the domestic labour of washing dishes and wiping them, but gradually and in the final two chapters of the novel, she adds, as does her mother, something new to her domestic labour: her work in the cotton field. The following conversation takes place between Ma and Rose:

"I'm goin' out," Rose of Sharon said.

"Out where?"

"Goin' out to pick cotton."

"You can't, Ma said. "You're too far along."

"No, I ain't. An' I'm a-goin'." (581)

Rose, who had previously accepted to cook for the family while Ma worked with the Joad men in the fields, here makes a decision that mobilises her domestic position.

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<sup>183</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 441-63 (p. 442).

<sup>184</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 3-50 (p. 32).

<sup>185</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 318-327 (pp. 322-3); Weigand, *Red Feminism*, pp. 15-16; Foley, *Radical Representations*, p. 245; 224; 227.

<sup>186</sup> *The Harvest Gypsies*, 26-31 (p. 30).

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-62 (pp. 61-2).

In a wider late 1930s context, Margaret Hagood clarifies that many Southern agrarian women preferred picking cotton or tobacco to doing the housework.<sup>188</sup> For these women, Hagood concludes: '[t]here is a great deal of pride in the ability to work like a man'.<sup>189</sup> James Agee, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which appeared in 1941, two years after both Hagood's study and Steinbeck's novel, maintains that picking cotton is one of the hardest jobs in the South. It is a job in which 'there should be no delay, no need to use the mind's judgments, and few mistakes'.<sup>190</sup> Another factor that makes this work difficult is the fact that

[C]otton plants are low [...] you are continuously somewhat stooped over even if you are a child, and are bent very deep if you are a man or a woman [...] a strong back is a godsend, but not even the strongest back was built for that treatment.<sup>191</sup>

While describing the reasons behind the burden of this work, Agee earlier in the same book suggests that Evans' photographs, which were attached to his prose, are more evocative than his own writing: '[w]ords cannot embody; they can only describe'.<sup>192</sup> Undoubtedly, Evans' pictures try to attract the audience's sympathy for the photographed proletarian people, as Rabinowitz argues about this and other documentary projects. 'A document', Rabinowitz explains, 'purports to tell truth, but it is always suspect because the truth-claim depends on differentiating itself from fiction, naming itself as non-fiction'.<sup>193</sup> Rabinowitz suggests that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, with its combination of essays and photographs, is 'reportage' about the struggles that farmers encountered in the South.<sup>194</sup> Blake Morrison also points out that this project is 'sometimes bracketed with *The Grapes of Wrath* [...] both were driven by sympathy for the rural poor'.<sup>195</sup> More than what Agee as well as Evans

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<sup>188</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 76-91 (p. 87).

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>190</sup> James Agee, and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 299.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>193</sup> Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 1-15 (p. 7).

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-55 (p. 36).

<sup>195</sup> Blake Morrison, 'Introduction', in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, vii-xii (p. viii).

sentimentalise, and what Hagood notes about a Southern woman's pride of working with her father in the cotton field,<sup>196</sup> though, Steinbeck portrays Rose as choosing the labour of picking cotton, in spite of its hard nature, to become her mother's right hand in the cotton field.

The penultimate inter-chapter about picking cotton in California, which closes with the line 'The ol' woman'll make some nice biscuits tonight, ef she ain't too tired' (557), precedes the prose describing Rose's engagement with this work, and this structural placement indicates Rose's release from confined domestic duties. Jeff Allred, widening Alfred Kazin's view about the sentimentalised factuality in the decade's documentation,<sup>197</sup> reads the visual-textual fragmentation in the decade's photo-text projects 'as a figure, not of failure or omission, but of germination', constructing '*plausible fictions of the real*'.<sup>198</sup> The modernist documentary construction, in spite of its association with the 'real', Allred explains, is not like the realistic fiction of the nineteenth century; rather, it is present in fiction 'in which the real-as-trace is embedded in narrative and thereby exerts a disruptive force'.<sup>199</sup> The integrated narratives in *The Grapes of Wrath*, which make the novel comparable to photo-texts projects, embody the 'disruptive force' wherein unsaid meanings emerge. The novel's late inter-chapter suggests that picking cotton, which is tiring and which is one of the central scenes in the novel's narratives, is an enfranchisement for women like Rose from the mere performance of household chores.

'Women of the Cotton Fields', a 1938 essay by Elaine Ellis, which appeared in *Crisis*, the African American periodical, draws attention to the double burden which Southern

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<sup>196</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 48-59 (p. 54).

<sup>197</sup> The thirties documentaries, to Kazin, were sentimentalised for they 'tried to depict and failed to master' reality as it is (*On Native Grounds*, p. 489).

<sup>198</sup> Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, 3-25 (pp. 10, 14). Italics in original.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

women, white and African Americans, encountered when working as cotton pickers. Ellis writes:

The men, women, and little children who work in these fields under the blazing Southern sun create the great Cotton Kingdom for which this region is famed. In return for their labor, they receive only poverty, ignorance, and disease.

And it is the woman, Negro and white, on whom the burden is heaviest.<sup>200</sup>

‘Even during pregnancy’, Ellis goes on, ‘a woman must work in the field. The fact that she is carrying a child does not excuse her from dragging and lifting the heavy cotton sack’.<sup>201</sup> In his essays about Dust Bowlers for the *News*, Steinbeck also sentimentalises a mother’s position by reporting on the death of a baby whose mother, because of her diet, ‘will not produce milk’.<sup>202</sup> Steinbeck goes on: ‘After it was born and she had seen that it was dead, the mother rolled over and lay still for two days. She is up today, tottering around’.<sup>203</sup> In *The Grapes of Wrath*’s story about the Joads, cotton picking, which appears in both the novel’s inter and main narratives, represents more than a danger to a pregnant woman’s health.

Rose’s working in the cotton field, in spite of Ma’s discouragement of the work because Rose is pregnant, points to her progress as an independent woman, for she not only makes a decision of her own, but she pushes her domestic limit. ‘Goin’ out to pick cotton’ is Rose’s decision, despite her knowing from the camp’s manger that working ‘too hard’ is the reason that two women in the camp lost their babies (424; 581). This labour, which the late inter-chapter suggests releases mothers from cooking, results in Rose’s giving birth to a stillborn infant – one towards which she feels no affection. On the one hand, this unmotherly

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<sup>200</sup> Elaine Ellis, ‘Women of the Cotton Fields’, in *Writing Red*, eds., 255-7 (p. 255).

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 256. The heaviest toil that these women encountered stems from their insufficient knowledge about sterilisation and their community’s insistence on them giving birth to many children so they joined their work in the coming seasons: ‘This is the woman whom civilization has passed by. But it is from her loins, no less than from the earth itself, that the world’s greatest cotton industry has sprung’ (Ellis, ‘Women of the Cotton Fields’, p. 255).

<sup>202</sup> *The Harvest Gypsies*, 26-31 (p. 30).

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

attitude bears a resemblance to that of Dos Passos' Margo, who takes 'the castor oil and quinine' to abort her baby and which, accordingly, frees her from domestic commitments (*TBM*, 975). On the other hand, Rose's status as a cotton picker problematises a sentimentalised view about this work's 'heaviest' burden on women, shown in Ellis' 'Women of the Cotton Fields' and in Steinbeck's own essays for *News*. Therefore, Rose's labour in picking cotton is both a development to her character and a challenge to mainstream assumptions about female cotton pickers.

The poem 'Picking Grapes' (1937), by Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, herself a Dust Bowl migrant who worked as a grapes picker in California, atypically hints that women in Dust Bowl contexts can obtain what they seek:

Magic seventeen  
and new in California

Working in bursting  
sweet in vineyards

Hot sand on soul  
one strap held by a  
safety pin

a girl could be whatever  
she desired

the first breath of  
Eve in Paradise.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, 'Picking Grapes', in *American Working-Class Literature*, pp. 536-7.



‘[T]he first breath of/Eve in Paradise’ is the term that can describe Steinbeck’s Rose of Sharon for she picks cotton with her family and, further, nurses a starving man despite rarely having drunk milk herself. The scene, taking place in a rain-soaked barn to which the Joads move after Rose’s stillbirth, describes in detail Rose’s prompt reactions – how she looks and even breathes once she decides to breastfeed the dying man. The scene reads:

She [Ma] looked at Rose of Sharon huddled in the comfort. Ma’s eyes passed Rose of Sharon’s eyes, and then came back to them. And the two of women looked deep into each other. The girl’s breath came short and gasping.

She said “Yes.”

Ma smiled. “I knowed you would. I knowed!” (618)

Ma here provokes Rose’s movement by suggesting with a thoughtful look that the debilitated Rose should breastfeed the starving man. Ma’s silence at this moment and her quick nods and looks suggest that she does not wish to influence Rose directly; at the same time, this indicates Rose’s maturity for she finally extends her support beyond the Joads’ circle and chooses to emulate her mother’s model of collective care. This scene is not dissimilar to the last Camera Eye of *The Big Money* which portrays two women’s cooperation with a destitute man: a woman ‘wipes sweat off his streaming face with a dirty denim sleeve’, and the ‘barefoot girl bring[s] him a tincup of water’ (*TBM*, 1208). Correspondingly, Ma impels Rose’s cooperative sentiment, and Rose chooses to follow in her mother’s collectivism and to breastfeed the starving stranger after a short breath and with an assured and ardent ‘Yes’.

The novel’s last inter-chapter – which prefigures the ‘full green hills’, (i.e, the breasts) to appear – becomes vivid with a fulfilled hope because of Ma’s and Rose’s choice to act rather than be passive. An earlier inter-chapter postulates that ‘[n]eed is the stimulus to concept, concept to action’,<sup>205</sup> and this line applies perfectly to the breastfeeding scene. The novel

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<sup>205</sup> *Grapes*, p. 207.

ends with Ma's look at Rose, and, as a consequence, with Rose exposing her breast to feed the stranger. Were they to speak but not act, the man would probably die of starvation. Both Ma and Rose exhibit the courage to collectively act and inherit the legacy of centeredness, thus turning the 'wrath' which women of the novel's late inter-chapters 'silently' wait for their men to show, into sustaining others' lives in actions (592). Alesya Petty, using Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, argues that Steinbeck's early 1930s *Pasture of Heaven*, a collection of stories about social struggles that the collection's title contradicts, utilises modernist experiments in fragmenting the written form to convey a unified theme.<sup>206</sup> *The Grapes of Wrath*, which consists of integrated polyphonic narratives, has, as Steinbeck declares about it, several 'layers'.<sup>207</sup> One of these layers pertains to women's decisions and actions in Dust Bowl contexts. The novel is neither naturalistic nor realistic,<sup>208</sup> though it contains elements of both styles. Despite the inactivity shown in the inter-chapters, the central narrative, as Donald V. Coers affirms, 'still holds hope for human advancement',<sup>209</sup> due to the actions of women such as Ma and Rose. The story about the Joads, then, typifies Steinbeck's views about women's agency, which he encodes in the inter-chapters, the segments whose symbols Ma and Rose translate into actions, especially in the nursing scene.

Rose's violation of breastfeeding norms is necessary in the novel's wider context, functioning at more than one level of meaning. Firstly, it sustains someone's life. Secondly, it becomes an escape for Rose, for she enjoys the experience of this nursing:

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<sup>206</sup> This one theme, to Petty, is 'the realities of everyday life and human tribulations [...] which often stand in conflict with societal expectations' Alesya Petty, 'Problems of Steinbeck's Poetics: Polyphony, Harmony, and Dissonance in *The Pastures of Heaven*', *Steinbeck Review*, 11.2 (2014), 171-184 (p. 182).

<sup>207</sup> Steinbeck, 'To Pascal Covici', in *Steinbeck Life in Letters*, eds. by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (London: William Heinemann td, 1975), 178-9 (p. 178).

<sup>208</sup> Realism differs from naturalism; the former overlook 'exposing the dirtier realities' which the latter celebrates and undertakes. See Matthew Beaumont, ed., *A Concise Companion to Realism* (Sussex: Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. xv.

<sup>209</sup> qtd., in Langione, 'John Steinbeck and the Perfectibility of Man (Louis Owens Essay Prize Winner)', 87-99 (p. 90). Also, see Donald V. Coers, Paul D. Ruffin, and Robert J. DeMott, eds., *After The Grapes of Wrath: Essays on John Steinbeck* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1995).

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side [...] She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There". Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously. (618-9)

The mysterious smile here seems like a response to the migrant mother's expression of anxiety in Lange's 'Migrant Mother'. Laura Hapke, in *Labor's Text*, writes that 'Humble and good, Ma Joad and her pregnant daughter are both versions' of this photograph, indicating their fortitude in hard conditions.<sup>210</sup> The Joad women also go beyond the static posture of Lange's photographed woman. Lange also photographed Thompson's nursing her baby,<sup>211</sup> and took other less well-known photographs of women breastfeeding in migrant labour camps.<sup>212</sup> These less iconic photographs by Lange, obviously, do not embed a complex political message like that in 'Migrant Mother', for they present a conventional moment of breastfeeding. Steinbeck's choice to include a non-conventional breastfeeding scene indicates a meaning relevant to women's role in saving other poor people's lives. Rose's smile in the nursing scene, as an instance, is a symbolic call for a transformation in women's confining roles. Like the figurative laughter in Hughes' novel, or even the primitiveness that Hughes' Harriett performs when dancing to or singing the blues in front of socially heterogeneous audiences to encode deeper political implications, Rose's breastfeeding signifies 'survival',<sup>213</sup> which can only be fulfilled through her breaking free from conventionally assigned roles.

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<sup>210</sup> Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 217-44 (p. 239).

<sup>211</sup> See <<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29527>>

<sup>212</sup> See <[http://johnedwinmason.typepad.com/john\\_edwin\\_mason\\_photogra/2009/10/dorothea-langes-migrant-mothers.html](http://johnedwinmason.typepad.com/john_edwin_mason_photogra/2009/10/dorothea-langes-migrant-mothers.html)>

<sup>213</sup> Steinbeck, 'To Pascal Covici', in *Steinbeck Life in Letters*, 178-9 (p. 178).

Women's breasts, which, as has been noted already, are metaphorically equated to the land in the inter-chapter which asserts that '[t]he full green hills are round and soft as breasts', establish a new life for the nursed object and its nursing subject (473). Rose's acceptance of this self-assigned mission shortly after her stillbirth figures that she disrupts the confining role of motherhood by showing compassion to destitute strangers, as did her mother when offering food to camp children. Neither a doting mother nor a submissive wife, Rose here carries the responsibility to change others' lives. Much like Harriett's dancing and blues singing in the context of social struggles, this breastfeeding decodes the symbolism indicated in the above-mentioned inter-chapter. The ambiguous smile, eventually printed on Rose's face, therefore, suggests her satisfaction with breaking away from domesticity which confines women to motherhood, and, instead, carrying a cooperative responsibility. More broadly, this indicates the novelist's message about women's will to fight hunger in Dust Bowl contexts.

This hope in women's contributions is certainly not directly political as the communism which the decade's social reporters often advocated.<sup>214</sup> These reporters, David Peeler notes, 'shaped their observations' to concur with certain political attitudes.<sup>215</sup> As an example, Steinbeck (who saw a woman nursing her infant when he was accompanied by photographer Horace Bristol to one of the camps)<sup>216</sup> argues in his essays published in a documentary project that malnutrition prevents mothers from producing breast milk.<sup>217</sup> By shaping what he had observed and modifying what he later wrote on, in his novel which highlights women's support, the fictionalised Rose repudiates her tiredness, the result of her

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<sup>214</sup> See Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet*, pp. 36-50.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-54 (p. 54).

<sup>216</sup> See Baskind, 'The "True" Story: *LIFE* Magazine, Horace Bristol, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*', 39-74 (pp. 67-8). Horace Bristol entitles his photograph of this nursing mother *Rose of Sharon*, after Steinbeck's character. It was taken in 1938 from a Californian camp near Visalia. See Horace Bristol, *Rose of Sharon*, in 'The Grapes of Wrath: Horace Bristol's California Photographs'.

<[http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/bristol/bristol\\_nursing\\_z.html](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/bristol/bristol_nursing_z.html)>.

<sup>217</sup> *The Harvest Gypsies*, 26-31 (p. 30).

under-nourished condition and the physical labour of picking cotton, and chooses to breastfeeds a starving man. As Rebecca Hinton points out, Rose here is ‘called out to extend her love and nurturing to others in need’.<sup>218</sup> Hinton, further, regards Steinbeck’s suggestion of solidarity between people, including strangers, as the solution for difficulties the Joads experience.<sup>219</sup> While cooperation is the novel’s ultimate solution to struggles like hunger, it occurs because of women like Rose and Ma, whom Steinbeck, offering key adjustments to the rhetoric of Dust Bowl documentary texts, releases from traditional domestic roles so that they can enact a wider, populist, agency.

Like Dos Passos in *The Big Money*, Steinbeck deliberately presents women as part of the people and as a symbol to change proletarian conditions. On examining the breastfeeding scene, Matthew Langione contends: ‘the final articulation of Steinbeck’s philosophy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, portrays a dependable and depending community’.<sup>220</sup> The independent community of which Langione writes is that of females, while the latter dependent community is of males. This salvation and dependency result in change and progress due to Ma’s and Rose’s presence. To critics such as Mimi Reisel Gladstein, the two women function as goddess mothers who have nothing to do except take care of their children.<sup>221</sup> Rose, however, according to Gudmarsdottir, taps into the ‘Madonna [archetype], in which the nurturing Mary and Mother Earth become one’.<sup>222</sup> While, certainly, the nursing scene in this novel turns Rose into a feminine or even a goddess archetype, when nurturing a man, Rose violates a limited presumption about mothers, for she establishes a cooperative role of her own choice. Tamara Rombold argues that the novel’s breastfeeding scene reflects hope in

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<sup>218</sup> Hinton, ‘Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*’, 101-3 (p. 102).

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., pp. 102-3.

<sup>220</sup> Langione, ‘John Steinbeck and the Perfectibility of Man (Louis Owens Essay Prize Winner)’, 87-99 (p. 95).

<sup>221</sup> See Mimi Reisel Gladstein, ‘The Indestructible Women: Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon’, in *Critical Essays on Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath*, ed. by John Ditsky (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989), p. xx.

<sup>222</sup> Gudmarsdottir, ‘Rapes of Earth and *Grapes of Wrath*: Steinbeck, Ecofeminism and the Metaphor of Rape’, 206-222 (p. 217).

change by populist rather than spiritual cooperation.<sup>223</sup> Steinbeck himself articulates this incident's figurative significance in a letter to publisher Pascal Covici. Rejecting the suggestion of changing this scene, Steinbeck proclaims:

I cannot change that ending. It is casual [...] If there is a symbol, it is a survival symbol not a love symbol, it must be an accident, it must be a stranger, and it must be quick.<sup>224</sup>

This deliberately chosen scene symbolises 'survival' for the fictionalised starving stranger, due to women like Rose.

While breastfeeding is absolutely a conventional female role and so Rose is acting within it, whom she feeds suggests a circumvention to this role's orthodoxy. Steinbeck's 1936 proletarian novel, *In Dubious Battle*, which describes a failed strike and proletarian struggles on Californian tenant farms, describes a female protagonist, Lisa, who denounces striking men's inaction, as 'the [nursing] girl with the baby'.<sup>225</sup> Literary critic Abby Werlock notes a slight change in Lisa's character and compares it to the characterisation of Ma and Rose. 'Like Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, whom she clearly adumbrates', writes Werlock, 'Lisa is not just part of "the people," but of the women, the feminine, the mothers, and the earth, and, one suspects, she will outlast the noise and the tumult raging around her.'<sup>226</sup> Whether Rose fits into these archetypes or otherwise, she embarks on the mission of saving strangers' lives, for her milk, due to inheriting her mother's collectivism, becomes free for those in need. What is personal becomes political here, and this agency is of a more complex kind than what Gudmarsdottir, Gladstein, Davis and Casey have noted.

Another example of the cooperative effort that *The Grapes of Wrath's* female characters embody is Ma's enlargement of even her little daughter's, Ruthie's, personal

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<sup>223</sup> Tamara Rombold, 'Biblical Inversion in *The Grapes of Wrath*', *College Literature*, 14.2 (Spring 1987), 146-166 (p. 164).

<sup>224</sup> Steinbeck, 'To Pascal Covici', in *Steinbeck Life in Letters*, 178-9 (p. 178).

<sup>225</sup> *In Dubious Battle*, p. 74, 212-3.

<sup>226</sup> Werlock, 'Looking at Lisa: The Function of the Feminine in Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*', 46-63 (p. 63).

scope. Shortly before Rose's suckling the hungry man, Ma commands Ruthie to give her young brother, Winfield, a petal from a flower she finds:

She [Ruthie] picked the flower. She took a petal carefully off and stuck it on her nose. Winfield ran up to see.

“Lemme have one?” he said.

“No, sir! It's all mine. I foun' it”. (615)

The scene is a flashback to and a foreshadowing of the way Ma raises her daughters; Ma shows Rose how to share things with others, even if that thing is very personal, and she raises Ruthie in a similar way. Ruthie begins to argue that Winfield needs to find his own flower, but Ma tells her in a threatening tone to give him one. Convinced by her mother's tone, Ruthie says, “I'll stick on one for you [Winfield]” (615-6). The petal Ruthie gives to her brother after Ma's command resonates with the milk Rose offers to the stranger after Ma's pointed look. This petal might become incidentally the milk that Ruthie might share in future with strangers, as Rose does in the nursing scene. Because of women like Ma and Rose, we are told that ‘a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family; the children were the children of all’ (264). In the camps, every person performs a self-assigned duty: ‘Children to gather wood, to carry water; men to pitch the tents and bring down the beds; women to cook the supper and to watch while family fed’ (267). To these duties, Ma and Rose add new dimensions: rationalised emotionality and extended cooperation.

The narrative about the Joads incorporates Ma's and Rose's fortitude in making changes in others' lives, particularly when they have a gradual release from married life, as Rose ultimately experiences. Joan Hedrick argues that the Joad men ‘can grow up, the novel seems to say, only by leaving women alone and ascending to a higher, “spiritual” plan’.<sup>227</sup> The Joad married women, the novel also seems to suggest, can grow up and ascend to a plan

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<sup>227</sup> Joan Hedrick, ‘Mother Earth and Earth Mother: The Recasting Myth’, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath*, 134-143 (pp. 142-3).

of cooperation once sexually distanced from their husbands. Le Sueur's 1939 mostly female-focused proletarian novel, *The Girl*, portrays a community of working-class women who suffer sexual victimisation and forced sterilisation, yet end up cooperating with one another against gendered and classed matters. In its scattered, multi-voiced narrative,<sup>228</sup> the novel calls for self-chosen abortions which women on the left, like Le Sueur herself, regarded as giving women personal autonomy and space for political work.<sup>229</sup> It also calls for women's cooperation with one another. The novel's narrator, the proletarian Girl, ultimately breastfeeds her friend Clara's daughter after Clara's death. The Girl addresses the infant: 'O girl [...] giving her my full breast of milk' (*TG*, 182). The nursed girl here might live for the release of working-class people and women from class and gender struggles, much like the nursing Girl. Notably, Steinbeck's novel, which also ends with a breastfeeding scene, promotes migrant women to be away from gendered strictures (like wifedom's sexist obligations). While she has six children, no scene in the novel refers to Ma as Pa's sexual partner. Alongside this atypical wifedom, Ma practices authority in her husband's presence, an action followed by her cooperation with people outside the Joad circle. Rose's developed agency when breastfeeding the stranger, similarly, follows the stillbirth and, certainly, the absence of her husband. The novel's story upholds women's sexual distance from their partners, for it allows women to have more space and a nonconventional role as Rose does in the nursing scene.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, in its integrated narratives, endeavours to free women from domestic chains, and to enlarge their cooperative agency during the Dust Bowl. The novel's inter-chapters attempt to create equality between the migrant men and women, and symbolically suggest that there is scope for women's agency. The central narrative goes

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<sup>228</sup> Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 237-80 (p. 264).

<sup>229</sup> See Katherine Rogers-Carpenter, "'A breast for all ... and milk for all': Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* and the 1930s CPUSA", *Rethinking Marxism* 21.4 (2009), pp. 514-530.



further to represent dynamic women, Ma and Rose, who ultimately release themselves from confined motherhood and subordinate wifehood, and who offers help to people in need. This novel, which appeared in a peak Popular Front year, offers symbolic and mobilised representations of women who exceed domestic roles and whose actions sustain, without any self-sacrifice, the life of Dust Bowlers.

Many literary critics' views about Ma Joad's and Rose's roles conclude with discussions of the novel's limited female agency. To Minter and Motley, for instance, women's role in the novel is the performance of maternal duties. On the other hand, to Gudmarsdottir and Hapke, Ma Joad's and Rose's representations are mythical, standing for Madonna and goddess Mothers. To Davis, further, the novel brings to the fore Tom's labour activism. While this chapter has not tended to revise these and similar views, the detailed reading I have offered does show that there are layers of female agency and sense of collective responsibility symbolised and nuanced in the novel's main and inter narratives. The novel has layers of sophistication which Steinbeck remarks on in one of his letters: 'There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself'.<sup>230</sup> These layers are shown by Steinbeck's use of symbolism in his novel's inter and main sections. I read *The Grapes of Wrath* in relation to Dos Passos' experimental register, for there are complex connections between the novel's multiple elements. The surface reading of the novel shows male agency and the necessity of their radical activity (as previous critics have noted). However, when digging into the relationship and connection between the sections of the novel, as this chapter does, forms of female agency start to emerge. Through symbolism and the integration of different elements, *The Grapes of Wrath* offers versions of female migrant agency.

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<sup>230</sup> Steinbeck, 'To Pascal Covici', in *Steinbeck Life in Letters*, pp. 178-9.

To Casey, who considers the novel's use of symbolism, Steinbeck's novel fails to avoid 'masculinist agrarian paradigms', like that about the secondary support of wives when helping their partners in farming activities.<sup>231</sup> I would agree that the novel does not avoid this agrarian norm. Nevertheless, I suggest that through its representation of Dust Bowl migration, *The Grapes of Wrath* tries to bypass gendered paradigms, especially when representing a Dust Bowl migrant mother whose character changes, enabling her to become a leading wife, an emotionally rationalised mother, a catalyst of populism, and a picker with her family without any form of self-sacrifice. Steinbeck also gives space for Rose, whose breastfeeding of the starving man signifies her breaking free from gendered limitations, to become another version of Ma. This chapter contends that Steinbeck, a modernist-populist communicator, mobilises gradually, literally and symbolically, Rose and Ma within the novel's prose narrative, and, to a varying degree, the migrant women within its inter-chapters. This text of integrated narratives, a style reminiscent of other leftist experimental novels including Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, attempts to challenge gendered political assumptions about working-class women who lived and worked during the Dust Bowl.

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<sup>231</sup> Casey, 'Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women's Progressive Fiction', p. 99.

## CONCLUSION

All four novelists discussed in this thesis move toward or attempt to reach the point of representing female agency in proletarian contexts. All four are free in the sense that they did not limit themselves to the era's various proscriptions and criteria regarding what or how proletarian writers should write, but that freedom was still bounded by the gendered parameters of 1930s culture and society. Laura Hapke refers to the 'angel/whore dichotomy' through which male intellectuals tended to portray women in proletarian novels from this period.<sup>1</sup> My study has shown that there are also midway layers within this dichotomy which Langston Hughes, Jack Conroy, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck at times reach, respectively, in their *Not Without Laughter*, *The Disinherited*, *The Big Money*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. All four novels, by addressing proletarian challenges from the 1930s or earlier, blending popular forms with narrative, and exploring certain ideals, offer in their lyrical or documentary segments stereotyped or sentimentalised images of women, which are destabilised through different or mobilised representations in the novels' stories.

The combinations of these representations, facilitated by the blending of narrative forms as well the use of symbolism, enable the four novelists *not* to maintain a coherent stance of misogyny. Hughes, who creates the blues songs in his novel, includes several symbols with meanings relevant to women's masked social awareness. The extended use of symbolism to also signify female agency occurs in *The Grapes of Wrath* wherein Steinbeck blends modernist, documentary, and other elements in his novel's narratives. Even Conroy and Dos Passos, who interpolate elements in their novels from the surrounding culture, use symbolism, albeit in a less degree than Hughes and Steinbeck, to establish underlying messages about women's tendency towards progressive or indirect radical activism. Through

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<sup>1</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 29-67 (p. 47).

the use of symbolism, different narrative forms, fragmentation, and multivoicedness, the four writers come to a sense of complex, distinct, understanding of female identity even when operating within a culture that broadly works in a masculinist way.

The kinds of close reading I have offered in the thesis could generate other critical perspectives on 1930s proletarian and experimental literature. These include consideration of the layered or unstable nature of *male* agency as presented in 1930s texts; the question of what kind of action such novels asked of or demanded from the men as well as women who comprised their 1930s audience; and the possibility of relating such texts to the twentieth-century history of feminism. First of all, it is important to keep in mind that it would be difficult for novelists with leftist leanings during the 1930s not to represent men's radical actions or men's progressive ideas absorbed from earlier decades in America. This engagement might be due to their novels' appearance in a period whose first leftist phase (the Third Period) emphasised men's masculine agency as it was called for early in the decade by activists like Mike Gold.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Barbara Foley, Laura Hapke, and Paula Rabinowitz, who offer a broad account of 1930s proletarian literature, argue that proletarian novels from the twilight of the Third Period, especially ones by male writers, privilege masculinity in their portrayal of radical politics. While it is true that such novels generally champion men's actions and that this kind of literature is written mostly to address working-class issues which are constructed as masculine, close readings to these and similar novels from the decade might draw out such writings' attempts to offer layers of male as well as female agency.

That men as well as women are portrayed in such novels in multi-voiced narratives, from juxtaposed angles (that of the society and that of the author), and through the interpolation of cultural forms, suggests that their portrayals at points collide with society's norms. Such novels represent realities about the proletariat's pressing conditions. On the

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<sup>2</sup> Gold, 'Go Left, Young Writers!', pp. 382-3.

other hand, their modernist forms facilitate the destabilisation of familiar conventions and patterns. Joseph Entin, analysing ‘sensational’ and ‘documentary’ elements in similar texts, contends that modernism ‘aims to unsettle and to transgress, to renew our vision by challenging, often in bold and deeply disturbing ways, established boundaries and conventions’.<sup>3</sup> ‘[I]nstability’ is a central feature that Andrzej Gasiorek identifies as being ‘at the heart of modernism in all its forms’.<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I have suggested that multi-layered representations of women, and similarly layered and unstable representations of male agency can be traced in Hughes’, Conroy’s, Dos Passos’ and Steinbeck’s novels, and in related male and female authored texts from the period. Indeed, in almost all such writings at least one male character edges towards radical, progressive, or collective agency. But, when digging into the blended narratives appear stereotyped and sentimentalised representations of men, as well as more nuanced and less overt forms of male political agency. Terms like ‘instability’ and ‘unsettle’ can be useful to examine how the agency of men is explored and varied in novels like those discussed in this thesis.

The fluctuation of male and female agency in such novels could suggest their authors’ endeavour towards eliciting any potential by their readers, men as well as women, to act against pressing conditions such as poverty, capitalism, racism, and the consequences of natural disasters like the Dust Bowl. My study has built on the recent work of literary historians (such as Janet Casey, Jessica Berman, and Jennifer A. Williamson) who draw attention to the presence of mobilised as well as symbolised, dialogised, and sentimentalised representations of working-class issues in modernist proletarian novels to explore the way these elements relate specifically to the representation of women and their agency. A comparable analysis of men’s unstable activity in the extra and main narratives of these and similar novels is still needed to present such texts as seeking male and female readers’

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<sup>3</sup> Entin, *Sensational Modernism*, 257-264 (p. 263).

<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *A History of Modernist Literature* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. x.

plausible agency at that time and as trying to challenge gendered constraints.

While such novels are not directly feminist they can be connected to forms of feminism. All four novels examined in this thesis complicate questions about women's roles inside and outside the home, exploring the extent to which female agency might extend beyond the domestic and the maternal. Such novels, then, begin to participate in the feminist project, which was about women's personal liberation in the early twentieth century,<sup>5</sup> their political activism as well as the 'woman question' in 1930s,<sup>6</sup> and then later about the construction of female roles and forms of liberation from domestic duties in the post-Second World War period. This participation took place in a moment of possibilities in the twentieth century. Betty Friedan, in her important second-wave feminist book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), looks back to the 1930s as a moment in which even mainstream popular short stories explored possibilities of female activities and liberties in ways that went even further than the novels discussed in this thesis. Friedan writes,

In 1939, the heroines of women's magazine stories were [...] New Women, creating with a gay determined spirit a new identity for women — a life of their own. There was an aura about them of becoming, of moving into a future that was going to be different from the past [...] And the spirit, courage, independence, determination [...] were part of their charm. There was a definite aura that their individuality was something to be admired, not unattractive to men, that men were drawn to them as much as for their spirit and character as for their look.<sup>7</sup>

Friedan, then, sees a possibility for pushing against gendered tensions in the 1930s. Indeed, the four novels discussed in my study, as their concerns were women with proletarian

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<sup>5</sup> This liberation includes self-advancement and sexual independence. See Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 13-50 (p. 39); Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 285-302 (p. 293).

<sup>6</sup> See Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 318-327 (pp. 322-3); Weigand, *Red Feminism*, pp. 15-16; Ware, *Holding their Own*, 117-140 (p. 120). Susan Ware mentions that in 1930s feminism became 'a commitment to a radical cause like the Communist Party instead of traditional feminism, which was seen, rightly or wrongly, as selfish, personal, and totally divorced from economic issues' (*Holding their Own*, p. 136).

<sup>7</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 34.

backgrounds, have not resolved a gendered problem like the one Freidan calls the ‘feminine mystique’ (the stricture which had not released middle-class women of 1940s-50s America from domestic duties).<sup>8</sup> However, all four novels experiment the viewing of women from multiple dimensions and the interrogation of gendered conventions. On the one hand, in the cultural moment of their novels, the modernist forms help writers to create instabilities, possibilities, competing voices, and evolving agencies of characters. On the other hand, feminism is an ongoing project and the problem of the ‘feminine mystique’ was neither resolved in 1940s-50s nor in earlier decades. The novels examined in this thesis are a contribution to the project of feminism that expanded and evolved in the 1960s and on into the twenty-first century.

Hughes, Conroy, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck wrote their books within the context of inherently masculine leftist politics, but through disrupting some of this culture’s paradigms and using modernist techniques, they offer representations of women which are not simply reductive and without agency. They attempt to cast women out of what Laura Hapke terms the ‘angel/whore dichotomy’.<sup>9</sup> Close analysis of similar novels from the decade – novels by other writers on the left, which interrogate norms and blend modernist forms – will show, in more complex ways than previous commentators on 1930s male authored texts of this kind have acknowledged, that portrayals of women in this literary leftist genre are layered, various, and always in flux. Such texts, whose main concern was to pull the proletariat out of its 1930s struggles, formally and thematically challenge the gendered confines that dominated early twentieth-century America.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 29-67 (p. 47).

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