

**The Story Less Told: Representations in the Inter-War Years of the American White  
Working Class by Four Female Authors**

**Paul Harper**

A thesis submitted for the degree of MPhil in Literature

Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies

University of Essex

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**Abstract**

This thesis will study novels written in the interwar years by four female authors: Anzia Yezierska, Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page. While a general overview of these authors' biographies, writing styles, themes, and approaches to issues surrounding race and religion will be provided, the thesis' main focuses are as follows: studying the way in which the authors treat gender through their representation of working-class women; exploring the interaction between art and propaganda in their novels; and considering the extent to which their backgrounds and life experiences influence their writing.

## **1: Introduction**

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis will study the plight of the poor, white, mostly urban working class during the inter-war years, 1918—1941, as represented by four female authors who wrote politically-charged, proletarian novels. The authors in question focused specifically on the experience of women and the double-burden under which they laboured: poor women often undertook roles as mothers, carers, and house-keepers for their own families while also being economically active workers. In the novels to be studied here, female characters who question or reject the model of marriage and motherhood face the disapproval of a society that views them as dangerously different. As well as studying the authors' treatment of gender through their representations of women and labour, the thesis will also provide biographical information about the authors and consider other themes in their writing, notably race and religion. It will explore the interaction between literature and propaganda, analysing the extent to which the novelists wrote what might be called propaganda and how effectively they offered models of what women's role in society could be. Finally, the thesis will consider how much of an influence the authors' backgrounds and life experiences had on their writing.

### **The Authors to be Studied**

The female authors on whom this thesis will focus are Anzia Yeziarska, Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page. All four wrote novels about working people, focusing on the plight of poor, working-class women. However, there are a number of important differences between the authors, particularly with regard to their backgrounds and the strength of their political convictions. These differences affect their writing and the message that it conveys.

Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page, all from the American South, are often grouped together by critics, but this is usually done in the context of studying their novels about the Gastonia textile mill strike; it is far less common to compare their lives and works more widely. Anzia Yeziarska is generally not studied alongside these other three, but her inclusion here adds an interesting and

important dimension: crucially, unlike the other three authors, she came from a poor background. Like Burke, Lumpkin, and Page, she was a prominent writer in the interwar years, and despite her novels being set in the American North, specifically New York City, she concentrates on similar themes to the other three, particularly with regard to women. She focuses her attention on poor whites, but being Jewish her characters have a slightly ambiguous racial status – they are white but they occupy a space in which they are still seen as somewhat ‘other’ because of their religion. All four authors write about the poor in an urban environment, even though Burke and Lumpkin do dedicate a large portion of their Gastonia novels to describing the mountain life that the central characters lived before they moved to the mill towns, and Myra Page’s *Daughter of the Hills* is set entirely in the mountains. The migration featured by Burke and Lumpkin is another similarity between the works of the authors: Yeziarska’s characters are recent immigrants to America, while the characters in the Gastonia novels are recent immigrants to the mill towns; furthermore, in *Moscow Yankee* Myra Page presents the experiences of American immigrants in Russia.

Particular attention is given by these authors to the portrayal of poor white women. Being white, these characters held a social position in society that was higher than that of poor blacks, but in many cases not very much higher; this fact is particularly true for Yeziarska’s poor Jewish characters. Many of the characters portrayed in these authors’ works existed, in a sense, ‘outside’ the system. They carried such a low status in society that political action to help them often failed to have any influence. They worked under ‘at will’ doctrines, which Nelson Lichtenstein describes: ‘labor law asserted that an employer is entitled to dismiss an employee “at will ... for good cause, no cause or even for cause morally wrong, without thereby being guilty of legal wrong.”’<sup>1</sup> They were easily abused, and laws designed to protect them in the workplace were easily circumvented by their bosses. To this end, the story of the white poor, and in particular white poor women, really is a story less heard and one to which novelists like those studied here give a voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3.

### **Social and Historical Context**

As many of the characters in the novels analysed in this thesis represent figures marginalised by society, it is important to consider the social and historical situation against which these novels were written; this situation includes the political, economic, and social position of women during the inter-war years. Understanding the relative popularity of socialism and socialist ideas at that time is also useful because it provides a context for the political events that take place in a number of the novels. The novels themselves often have what might be called a claustrophobic feel to them: they focus on characters with limited educational opportunities whose lives are isolated from the world that exists beyond their own geographically narrow borders; this makes a detailed study of the wider contexts even more important for it locates the novels and novelists in a place, not just in the sense of time, but also in terms of social ideals and movements.

The history, therefore, is very significant when studying the literature, but the literature to be studied here has particular relevance to the history as well because it weaves a story around the facts that are known, presenting alternative histories at times where there are gaps in the historical archive. Literature opens up the history and engages with it in a way that can increase understanding of the effects that economic and political systems have upon individuals and communities. The literature, therefore, does something that the history alone cannot do, and the literature is what this thesis will ultimately focus on, but not before a vital historical context is provided. There is good reason for this: taken alone, the literature here has much to say about what it means to be a human being – the human condition – but placed in a social and historical context not only can the literature's place in time be better understood, but wider concepts and ideas can be considered. These concepts will also be explored before the thesis turns to the primary issue of the four novelists and their works.

### **Women's Position in Early-Twentieth Century America**

The political standing of women in American society was greatly improved on 18 August 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the vote,

became law.<sup>2</sup> A coalition of women's groups had fought for suffrage, but, according to Lois Banner, once it was achieved 'the feminist movement broke apart, and the interest of American women turned away from feminism and social reform.'<sup>3</sup> She goes on to consider that 'feminism also failed to take root in the 1920s because it had limited appeal for young women'.<sup>4</sup> A suggested reason for this is that young-women's attitude 'was cavalier toward the achievement of their elders, including the hard-won gains in woman's rights.'<sup>5</sup> Playwright Lillian Hellman, who was a part of the Left literary movement of the inter-war years, commented on this subject:

By the time I grew up the fight for the emancipation of women, their rights under the law, in the office, in bed, was stale stuff. My generation didn't think much about the place or the problems of women, were not conscious that the designs we saw around us had so recently been formed or that we were still part of that formation.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from what some saw as a lack of interest among many young women, another factor that hampered the advance of women's rights in the 1920s was a serious split in the women's movement. This divide centred on the controversial Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), introduced by the National Woman's Party (NWP) in 1923 to, in the word of S. J. Kleinberg, 'overcome laws hampering full participation in economic and political life.'<sup>7</sup> The wording of the ERA was simple: 'No political, civil or legal disabilities or inequalities on account of sex nor on account of marriage, unless applying equally to both sexes, shall exist within the United States or any territory thereof.'<sup>8</sup> However, ERA became the focal point for what Philip Foner describes as the 'controversy [that] raged within feminist circles as social feminists committed to gradualism and protective legislation fought with militant feminists favoring individual equal rights.'<sup>9</sup> Banner explains that 'most women's organizations ... opposed the ERA on the grounds that factory women required special

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<sup>2</sup> Lois W. Banner, *Women in Modern America: A Brief History* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 122.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Lillian Hellman quoted in Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 143.

<sup>7</sup> S.J. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States, 1830-1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 289.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From World War I to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 139.

<sup>9</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 289.



legislation.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most vociferous of these opposing groups was the Woman's Trade Union League (WTUL), which 'expressed concern that ... the ... courts ... would seize upon the words "disabilities" and "inequalities" as a pretext to declare unconstitutional special legislation in various states relating to women in industry, and would proceed to wipe out the special dispensations granted to women workers by law after years of ceaseless struggle.'<sup>11</sup>

The difference of opinion between the National Woman's Party and the WTUL over the ERA could, to some extent, be defined along class lines. The Woman's Party had a small but often wealthy membership that included eminent women.<sup>12</sup> It opposed more militant demands, including the legalization of birth control, even though such legislation could have had an extremely positive impact for working-class women. The WTUL reaction to the National Woman's Party's support of the ERA was that 'while the professional women who made up the bulk of the National Woman's Party might not need the safeguards of special legislation, workingwomen did, and they would not be aided by a meaningless equality if the protective legislation they needed more than men were wiped out.'<sup>13</sup> This view was supported by the findings of a 1927 Consumers' League of New York survey, which revealed that four out of five women questioned supported a law limiting a woman's weekly working hours to forty-eight;<sup>14</sup> this statistic was based on the responses of 462 workingwomen in manufacturing and mercantile establishments.

It could be argued that the National Woman's Party represented the ideologies of middle-class feminists who could afford to idealize about issues such as equality without considering their actual impact in reality. This is not to say that the reality of an unequal society was particularly positive for working women, but protective legislation, where it was properly enacted and observed, was a help to many working women. However, the legislation was not without its failings, and Kleinberg explores militant feminists' reaction to it:

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<sup>10</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 132.

<sup>11</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 139-40.

<sup>12</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 132.

<sup>13</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 140.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Protective legislation denied women jobs and ignored agricultural workers and domestic laborers who toiled longer hours than industrial workers. It excluded women from particular (frequently better paying) jobs but ignored abuses elsewhere. A Connecticut statute forbade women from working as waitresses after 10 p.m. when wage and tips were highest but did not prevent women from scrubbing office floors or nursing late at night.<sup>15</sup>

In response to this position, the WTUL did acknowledge that some women workers, particularly those who competed directly with men for work, would suffer because of protective legislation. Yet the league insisted that most women workers needed protective legislation, and that, therefore, the vast majority would benefit.<sup>16</sup> This argument diminishes the rights of the individual and favours what is best for the majority. It is a precarious standpoint because if there are enough individuals who are negatively affected by something, or those individuals affected have sufficient means or desire to speak up for themselves, then a split is created, which is exactly what happened over the issue of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Julie A. Matthaei explains that ‘the cult of domesticity’ that ‘kept women in the home if possible ... did not exclude women from the labor force’,<sup>17</sup> yet the economic position of women in American society during the inter-war years did not improve to the extent that women’s groups and social reformers would have hoped. Referring to the 1920s, Lois Banner explains that ‘the popular evidence of women’s emancipation ... masked the discrimination against women that still existed’, and ‘the common assumption that the proportion of women who worked increased ... is inaccurate. It is true that an additional two million women had jobs, but this was a reflection of general population growth.’<sup>18</sup> William O’Neill posits that changes at the end of the nineteenth century were more consequential for women: ‘Between 1880 and 1890 the employment of women in most parts of the economy became an established fact. This was surely the most significant event in the modern history of women.’<sup>19</sup> O’Neill also states that ‘between 1870 and 1890 the number of colleges admitting women almost doubled, and the number of female college students

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<sup>15</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 290.

<sup>16</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 140-1.

<sup>17</sup> Julie A. Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America: Women’s Work, the Sexual Division of Labour, and Capitalism* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 141.

<sup>18</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 148-9.

<sup>19</sup> William L. O’Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 147.

increased fivefold.<sup>20</sup> According to some sources, the proportion of American women who were gainfully employed between 1920 and 1940 increased by only around two percent, from 23.7 percent in 1920 to 25.8 percent in 1940.<sup>21</sup> Other sources suggest a slightly larger 5 percent increase in the proportion of women in the labour force over the same period, from 22.7 percent in 1920 to 27.9 percent in 1940.<sup>22</sup> In the ten years between 1920 and 1930, however, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census statistics suggest no increase at all in the participation rate of women in the workforce when measured as a proportion of the total population.<sup>23</sup> In any case, the rise in the percentage of working women was but a modest one, and when the proportion of women who were in the labour force is compared with the proportion of men, which hovered at around 84 percent, it is clear that women were in a vastly inferior economic position to men during the interwar years.

The largest rise in the proportion of working women was seen in the number of married women who were in paid employment, which increased from 9 percent in 1920 to 13.8 percent by 1940. Moreover, the proportion of married white women working rose from 6.5 percent to 12.5 percent during this period. The number of non-white women in the labour market actually fell by some six percent between 1930 and 1940, the years of the Great Depression, even though the percentage of white women employed was slightly higher in 1940 than it had been at the beginning of the 1930s.<sup>24</sup>

Many employed women held managerial, clerical and sales positions: 39 percent of all employed women in 1920 and 45 percent in 1940, and in 1940 women 'comprised 54 percent of all clerical and kindred workers.'<sup>25</sup> Yet the fact that women did move into clerical work in increasing numbers was not the great improvement in position that it might at first appear to be: as Kleinberg asserts, by 1920 'clerical work had been transformed from a stepping stone to management to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 208. The figures are from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

<sup>22</sup> Blau et al., *The Economics of Women*, 80. The figures are from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

<sup>23</sup> Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America*, 142.

<sup>24</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 208.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 210.

dead-end female employment in stenography, typing, and filing', and that women's wages still 'lagged behind men's'.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, 'men and women still occupied distinct niches in the white collar world. Women taught in elementary schools while men dominated high school and college teaching; women were nurses and men were doctors.'<sup>27</sup> Banner affirms the lack of positive change when she concludes that women 'did not improve their position in the labor force in the 1920s',<sup>28</sup> and this situation did not alter radically in the 1930s.

In many cases, the situation of women in relation to men in mixed-sex workplaces did not improve either. In 'medicine ... the proportion of women to men declined'<sup>29</sup> in the 1920s; in fact, there were '7 percent fewer [female] physicians' in 1930 than there had been in 1910.<sup>30</sup> And although O'Neill accepts that '[m]ost professions showed an absolute increase in the numbers of women' between 1910 and 1930, a fact that has been attributed to the general population increase, he points out that 'by 1930 there were 6 per cent fewer women musicians and music teachers than in 1910'.<sup>31</sup> He also uses statistics to demonstrate the proportional decline in the number of women attending college when compared with the number of men: 'While the percentage of all women who went to college increased, the proportion of women to men peaked out in 1920. In that year women made up 47.3 per cent of the enrolment of regular four-year colleges; by 1930 that figure had dropped to 43.7 per cent, and continued to fall for several decades.'<sup>32</sup> These statistics are referring to the proportion of women to men and not the actual number of women enrolled in colleges, which did increase. Inez Irwin wrote the following on this issue in 1933: 'A scandal in 1833, a butt of ridicule in 1860, daring departure in 1880, a faint oddity in 1900, higher education has become in 1933 a commonplace – like literacy in general.'<sup>33</sup> Yet statistics belie this positive reading of the position of women, particularly poor women. Referring to working-class jobs,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 210-11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>28</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 149.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>30</sup> O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave*, 305.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Inez Irwin quoted in Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America*, 256.

one study suggests that ‘the differential between the hourly wages paid to unskilled male and female workers rose from 6.3 cents in 1923 to 10.2 cents in 1929.’<sup>34</sup>

Matthaei highlights the fact that ‘often the labor-force participation of the homemaker started with the national emergency of war. Both World War I and World War II “drafted” married women into the labor force to support the war effort.... After having had this working experience, some women stayed.’<sup>35</sup> However, there are those who feel that behind the apparent new freedoms that women gained after World War I, perhaps most visually stated in the image of the carefree ‘flapper’, lay a darker reality. Historian Peterson Del Mar believes ‘that women became more vulnerable to violence in the inter-war years as society seemed more accepting of it.’<sup>36</sup> A possible explanation for this acceptance is proposed by Kevin White, who describes ‘youth culture of the early twentieth century as encouraging displays of excessive masculinity which easily slipped over into abuse.’<sup>37</sup> Kleinberg adds to this explanation: ‘Money problems during the Depression also exacerbated male abuse and resentment against female independence.’<sup>38</sup>

The lack of improvement in women’s standing affected all classes, but the effect that it had on poor women was far more damaging than it was on women from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Working-class women did not, on the whole, seek paid employment to improve the social standing of their sex; they sought work as a means by which to earn enough money to survive. This was particularly true of women with children, for as Kleinberg explains, ‘mothers worked for the same reason as fathers: to earn sufficient wages to support their families.’<sup>39</sup> If wages were reduced, poor women, and men, who were already barely able to survive had to somehow manage to feed, clothe and shelter themselves and their families on even less money. And because better-paid careers with improved working conditions were unavailable to them, poor women had no choice but to continue working for little reward in the often appalling conditions that industry

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<sup>34</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 156.

<sup>35</sup> Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America*, 250.

<sup>36</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 243.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

provided for unskilled workers. They could not resort to comfortable or wealthy families for support, and in the case of the poorest workers it was only the second wage provided by the wife that prevented a family from starving. Kleinberg affirms that between 1920 and 1945 'social acceptance of female economic activity fluctuated with the business cycle, yet a growing number of women worked regardless of hostile public opinion because they or their families needed the money.'<sup>40</sup>

Even some New Deal legislation operated in a way that effectively reduced women's opportunities. Kleinberg asserts that 'New Deal employment and relief programs maintained the gendered wage differentials common in private industries before the Depression. The 12 percent of FERA [Federal Emergency Relief Administration] workers who were women received lower wages than men.... Women disproportionately found themselves getting FERA relief handouts rather than jobs.'<sup>41</sup> Banner explains how the 1933 National Recovery Act (NRA) 'ruled that only one member of a family could work in the federal civil service, anticipating thereby more jobs for heads of families. The result was the resignation of thousands of women with civil service jobs, who usually earned less than their husbands.'<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the legislatures of 26 states introduced bills prohibiting the employment of married women.<sup>43</sup> The Social Security Act (SSA) was another example of New Deal legislation that arguably favoured men. 'Debate over the "new woman" of the previous decade, who combined work and family, was completely subsumed ... by the national concern over the "forgotten man" who combined no work with a possibly demoralized and disintegrating family. New Dealers ... developed programs which served male breadwinners, assuming this would provide for women as part of families', states Kleinberg.<sup>44</sup> She believes that 'the New Deal rejected ... radical feminism ... and persisted in viewing women as part of a family, not as individuals.'<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>42</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 183.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 299-300.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 303.

As well as debate about the 'New Woman', the representation of women's experiences during the Great Depression is more often than not also subsumed into those of men. Paula Rabinowitz declares that 'women have remained invisible in standard accounts of the 1930s, particularly those written by literary radicals both then and now.'<sup>46</sup> One example of this invisibility can be found in statistics regarding railriders, or hoboes, the '1 to 2 million more or less permanent migrants riding the rails' in their countryside search for work, of whom 'more than 145,000 were homeless girls and women'.<sup>47</sup> This is a significant minority; yet despite this evidence, the content of many films and books related to this topic would suggest that there were almost no women riding the railroads during the Depression.

There is also a perception that women were affected less than men by the economic crisis of the 1930s because, as Ruth Milkman suggests, 'the occupations in which women were concentrated ... contracted less than those in which men were concentrated'; therefore, women enjoyed a measure of protection from unemployment in the Great Depression.'<sup>48</sup> Rose Wortis's view contests this idea: she 'noted early in the depression that since most women were concentrated in the irregular, unskilled, and highly seasonal industries, "the increase of unemployment generally has greatly affected working women."<sup>49</sup> These conflicting views highlight how difficult it can be to discover historical truths, a difficulty made even more apparent by the results of a study about the number of unemployed women: 'On the basis of ... national and local studies, Grace Hutchins concluded that the number of jobless women in the autumn of 1933 was closer to 4 million than to the 2 million figure in the Women's Bureau report.'<sup>50</sup> The truth is difficult to ascertain, but, given how difficult it would have been to keep a track of such statistics in the 1930s, official figures would probably show the lowest possible number, and a higher number of unemployed women should be expected, as Hutchins' study suggests.

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<sup>46</sup> Rabinowitz, Paula, *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>47</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 262.

<sup>48</sup> Ruth Milkman quoted in Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 256.

<sup>49</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 256.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

### Women and the Labour Movement

The place of women in the labour movement, and specifically in labour unions, is also worthy of consideration, particularly as a number of the texts that will be analysed in this thesis are directly concerned with labour disputes. Women were heavily involved in the 1919 Lawrence Textile Mill strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, demanding reduced working hours with no reduction in pay; newspaper reports at the time of the strike stated that ‘fully sixty percent of the strikers are women ... and they are already proving themselves to be worthy of the textile women who amazed the nation with their spirit and militancy in 1912.’<sup>51</sup> Mid-1920s labour disputes in the textile industry demonstrated that women were able to organise and be loyal trade unionists even in difficult conditions.<sup>52</sup> These were working-class women in paid employment standing up for their rights.

It was a woman, Florence Reece, who penned the well-known labour song “Which Side Are You On?” during the violent and bloody miners’ strike that took place between 1931 and 1932 in Harlan County, Kentucky. This song was a battle-cry; its impassioned lyrics call on all workers to stand up and fight against their oppression:

If you go to Harlan County,  
There is no neutral there,  
You’ll either be a union man  
Or a thug for J. H. Blair.<sup>53</sup>

Harlan was not the first miners’ dispute in which women had been active. A 1927 strike in the Central Competitive Field (western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) led by the United Mine Workers’ Union saw women of the coal-mining camps become ‘famous for their activities.’<sup>54</sup> These were the wives of striking miners supporting their husbands’ cause as well as the cause of the wider working class.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 117-118.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>53</sup> Florence Reece, “Which Side Are You On?”, in *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940*, ed. Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), 182.

<sup>54</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 245-6.



It was not just women in paid employment who protested during the inter-war years. Annelise Orleck states that ‘from the late 1920s through the 1940s, there was a remarkable surge of activism by working-class American housewives.’<sup>55</sup> One such piece of activism was a Seattle housewives’ flour boycott in 1936, led by Jean Stovel, who uttered the words ‘We are that mythical thing called the public and so we shall demand a hearing.’ This line was preceded by a telling statement: ‘Women have sold the idea of organization – their own vast power – to themselves, the result of bitter experience.’<sup>56</sup>

These examples are just a handful of many demonstrating the fact that women played an important and at times vital role in the economic and political activism of America’s inter-war years; as the examples make clear, this is true regardless of whether the women were workers in paid employment, the wives of striking male workers, or housewives working in the domestic sphere.

A notion held by a number of organizations and individuals was that women were more difficult to organize into labour unions. Records of the number of women in unions would appear to confirm this idea. A study by the Labor Department’s Women’s Bureau in the 1920s found that ‘only one out of every thirty-four women was a member of organized labor (compared with one out of nine men).’<sup>57</sup> This fact is supported by another statistic: in 1920, ‘8 percent of the trade union membership was female, with 6.6 percent of workingwomen organized.’<sup>58</sup> The relatively low numbers of women who were in labour unions, even at the end of the 1930s after a decade of economic depression, is again highlighted by facts: the ‘net result of ... organizing drives was to increase female union membership from about 250 000 in 1929 to approximately 800 000 in 1939.’<sup>59</sup> This increase is in itself quite dramatic, but the population increased by some 9 million in that same period, from 123 million in 1930 to 132 million in 1940; moreover, the population of the continental United States, which does not include what the census defined as

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<sup>55</sup> Annelise Orleck, ‘“We Are That Mythical Thing Called the Public”: Militant Housewives during the Great Depression,’ in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 376.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>57</sup> Laura Hapke, *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 184.

<sup>58</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 133.

<sup>59</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 225.

'Outlying Possessions' such as Alaska, was only 92 million in 1910; these quite rapid population increases (14.9% more people in 1920 than 1910, and 16.1% more people in 1930 than 1920) would have added many more women of employable age to the workforce.<sup>60</sup> Eight-hundred-thousand union members out of some 65 million or so women who would have been living in the United States in 1940, even taking into account that a number of those women would have been too young or too old to be working, might be a significant minority, but it is overwhelmingly a minority just the same. This difficulty recruiting women into unions was also used by the WTUL as part of its reasoning for why working women needed special legislation. Ethel Smith, a WTUL spokesperson, expanded thus:

For one reason or another, women do not organize into labor bodies as effectively as men. They are, in many instances, just transients on the job. It is not life work with them. Because of that, their labor strength cannot be compared with men. They cannot go to employers and make agreements for themselves. To keep them from being exploited, different states passed labor legislation. The minimum wage law is one; the eight-hour day is another. Without these laws women might still be working life-killing hours at miserable wages.<sup>61</sup>

In some places, like the Gastonia textile mills, women were still working such 'life-killing hours at miserable wages.' But by 1925 'almost all states restricted women's working hours; one-third defined minimum wages of working conditions.'<sup>62</sup> The National Woman's Party argued that if the ERA was introduced, women would be able to negotiate better working arrangements directly with their employers, but the weight of evidence would seem to suggest that this would not have been the case had such a situation ever occurred.

The argument made by Ethel Smith of the WTUL provides one reason for why women did not organize into labour unions as effectively as men. Another important reason for the relative lack of women in labour unions was the attitude of certain unions toward women. Kleinberg asserts that 'the attitude of union leaders in the 1920s scarcely reflected the changed nature of the female labor force.... Union bosses still regarded women as a temporary labor force that took jobs away

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<sup>60</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov> (accessed 1 April 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 141.

<sup>62</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 290.

from “real” workers, that is, men.’<sup>63</sup> She also notes that ‘the American Federation of Labor (AFL) did little to encourage female participation. Its executive council had no female delegates, even though women comprised a significant proportion of the membership in a few large unions.’<sup>64</sup> Until the formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization in 1935, the AFL was the only unifying group for the American labour movement.<sup>65</sup> The AFL was a craft- or skill-based organization; it did not organize workers based on whole industries, or workplaces, as the CIO later would. The CIO was formed as a breakaway from the AFL when the question of whether union organization should be based on craft or industry became too divisive. The CIO changed its name to the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938 and competed with the AFL to organize American labour until the two organizations merged in 1955.<sup>66</sup> The CIO was far more positive toward working women than the AFL, and it became what Kleinberg calls ‘a bastion of female labor organization. Its president John L. Lewis supported equal pay for equal work.’<sup>67</sup> Lewis is not viewed by all historians in a positive light, but whatever his motivations for supporting equal pay for equal work, the fact that he did was a help to women workers.

The problem for women during the inter-war years was that the CIO was not formed until 1935; before that time they had only the AFL to ‘help’ them. Female workers were often unskilled, and as Banner explains, ‘given the difficulties of unionization, skilled workers had little interest in taking on the problems of unskilled laborers.’<sup>68</sup> She continues by stating that AFL members did not want competition for jobs from women, who were cheaper to employ than men, and that the AFL was ‘devoted to the idea of the “family wage”, which would see men earn enough money for their families so that women could stay at home. The AFL constitution did officially outlaw sex discrimination, but in reality ‘union leaders simply excluded women’s work when defining the crafts included in their union,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (CD-ROM, 2007 Deluxe Edition), s.v. “American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations ((AFL-CIO)).”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 225.

<sup>68</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 67.

even when this work might be considered skilled labor.<sup>69</sup> This opposition to organizing women occurred in spite of women proving themselves time and again to be able to take on leading roles in strike action. In 1919, unions with whole or majority women members were among the first to vote for a general strike.<sup>70</sup> The Gastonia novels studied here portray women not only actively involved with unions but taking lead roles within them, events corroborated by the historical record.

A number of unions went as far as openly barring women from joining. By 1924 five international unions continued that practice and other internationals were openly against the admission of women.<sup>71</sup> D'Ann Campbell highlights how as late as 1940 in California 'the unions in certain industries ... were "hostile" to women members. Only one local in ten had even a token woman member.'<sup>72</sup> These 'hostile' industries included construction, transportation, and automobiles, in other words those that are collectively referred to as heavy industry. Campbell does point out that there were industrial sectors in which 'prewar unions were receptive to women', and at the 1921 AFL convention 'a number of male delegates' had spoken out on behalf of an 'industrial equality amendment' proposed by the WTUL.<sup>73</sup> Unions that were more radical, like the International Workers of the World (IWW), did not exclude women, but they had nothing like the power and reach of the AFL.

Along with these male delegates at the 1921 AFL convention, there were many men who supported moves towards equal opportunities for women. Michael S. Kimmel finds evidence of this fact in American society as far back as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Even before the first Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, heralded the birth of the organized women's movement in 1848, American men had begun to argue in favour of women's rights. That celebrated radical, Thomas Paine, for example, mused in 1775 that formal declaration of independence from England should include women, since women have, as he put it, "an equal right to virtue".<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 106.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>72</sup> D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 142.

<sup>73</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 135.

<sup>74</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, "From 'Conscience and Common Sense' to 'Feminism for Men': Pro-Feminist Men's Rhetorics of Support for Women's Equality" in *Feminism and Men: Reconstructing Gender*

Yet while clearly not all men, male union members, or all unions, were against gender equality, too many were. Campbell makes a telling statement on this issue when she expresses that 'hostile unions did not hide their true feelings. Studying the hostile unions and the experiences of their women members provides an insight into why the majority of women, then as now, were negative toward organized labor.'<sup>75</sup> She refers to a number of individual workers' experiences, including that of a female aircraft worker: 'I never walked a longer road in my life than that to the tool room'.<sup>76</sup> And Campbell herself damningly concludes that 'union policy implicitly placed gender ahead of class. The needs of the bona fide members, the men, came regardless of the cost of divisiveness among the working class.'<sup>77</sup> Although she is referring more to the 1940s than to the interwar years, Campbell's conclusion, when read alongside other evidence from the previous decades, would appear to resonate with the experience that women had with an unfortunately large number of labour unions throughout the early part of the twentieth century.

### Socialism in Early-Twentieth Century America

Socialism became a significant political force for the first and only time in American history during the early decades of the twentieth century. The Socialist Party's Eugene Debs garnered nearly a million votes in the 1920 presidential election and around nine hundred thousand in 1912; he also received four hundred thousand votes in 1904. Debs ran for president on a total of five occasions.<sup>78</sup> One reason for this relative rise of socialism in America was that proportionally more people were employed in industry than at any previous time: the poor and often dangerous working conditions; the sense of injustice at working to make somebody else very rich while being paid a low wage; and the fact that people were working together on-mass in factories are all factors that contributed to the working class turning to

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*Relations*, ed. Steven P. Schacht and Doris W. Ewing (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>75</sup> Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 143.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>78</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (CD-ROM, 2007 Deluxe Edition), s.v. "Eugene Debs" and "American Presidential Election, 1912."

socialism as a means of improving their quality of life. With regard to men, the shift from the majority working for themselves to the majority being employees occurred within just a couple of generations. Before the civil war, nine of every ten American men worked as farmers or were self-employed businessmen; by 1870 that number had dropped to two in every three, and by 1910 less than one-third of all American men were independently employed.<sup>79</sup>

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, few corporations had discovered effective means of ensuring working-class cooperation in the way that those like Ford Motor Company would do in the 1920s. Douglas Wixson explores how Ford 'placed a new kind of freedom so tantalizingly close to the wage earner that most workers were willing to accept their tenuous lot.'<sup>80</sup> Stephen Mayer expands on this point: 'With their bonuses and overtime pay, Ford workers could purchase automobiles on time. They joined other assembly-line workers toilers in buying tract houses and furniture on the installment plan. And they were also prime customers for the mass of goods and entertainments newly available to the working class.'<sup>81</sup> Laura Hapke refers to this situation and the resultant loyalty Ford workers gave to the company as the 'Ford mystique'.<sup>82</sup> The instalment plan method of purchasing went beyond just Ford workers: a number of characters in the novels studied here partake in instalment plans to purchase items that they cannot afford, and they are then forced to work even longer hours to meet their payments.

Of course, relatively good treatment by companies like Ford (and the relative part of this is important) was not as positive as it might sound, and it was not to last:

The \$5 day that brought ... [Ford] so much attention in 1914 carried with it, for workers, the price of often overbearing paternalism. It was, moreover, no guarantee for the future; in 1929 Ford instituted a \$7 day, but in 1932, as part of the fiscal stringency imposed by falling sales and the Great Depression, that was cut to \$4, below prevailing industry wages.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kimmel, "From 'Conscience and Common Sense' to 'Feminism for Men'", 29.

<sup>80</sup> Douglas Wixson quoted in Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 171.

<sup>81</sup> Stephen Meyer, quoted in Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 171.

<sup>82</sup> Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 171.

<sup>83</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (CD-ROM, 2007 Deluxe Edition), s.v. "Henry Ford."

By giving workers a sense that they could have a more comfortable life if they continued working hard and being part of the system, Ford and similar companies did, to a certain extent at least, manage to engender a loyalty in their workers and, perhaps more importantly for the rich industrialists, limit the spread of socialist and communist ideas among their workforce. The mill owners in the Gastonia region took similar actions, though not in terms of pay; they provided housing that workers could rent and churches for them to attend. Such an approach by businesses appeared to work: 'revisionist historians point out that only 7 percent of American workers engaged in militant protest at the height of the Depression',<sup>84</sup> states Hapke. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case, but it could be partly explained by the fact that the loyalty of American workers was strong. Such loyalty would have been further bolstered by the sense that capitalism was the American way: a belief in any other system would have been seen as unpatriotic. This theme is explored by Myra Page in *Moscow Yankee*: Page's portrayal of Andy's friends deciding to leave Moscow and return to the States is an acknowledgement of the fact that many workers would have had similar feelings about what might be termed 'the American way of things'.

Another reason for the decline in the number of socialist votes after 1920 was what became known as the 'red scare', which spanned the years between the 1917 American entrance into World War I and 1923; it resulted in mass deportations of people whom the government considered to be communist.<sup>85</sup> The Socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas did receive 884,781 popular votes in 1932, and the Communist candidate William Z. Foster got more than one hundred thousand in the same election, but this was at the beginning of the Great Depression; these figures also accounted for proportionally fewer votes than in 1920 because of the increase in population. Those with socialist and communist ideals maintained a presence in American politics through to World War II that has not been seen again, but it was in the first two decades of the century that socialist politicians had the largest amount of popular support, with a number of socialist

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<sup>84</sup> Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 220.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

mayors elected and, as has been stated, relatively large numbers of votes cast for socialists at national elections.

Jim Bissett states that ‘the strongest state expression of socialism in the United States occurred, not in the urban citadels of the American working class, but in the remote towns and hamlets of rural Oklahoma.’<sup>86</sup> He expands on his point by detailing how ‘in many areas of the state, socialists surpassed Republicans as the Democratic Party’s most potent challengers for political office, and between 1914 and 1917 the Socialist Party of Oklahoma was without question a major political force in the Sooner State.’<sup>87</sup> As interesting as such a fact is, however, what makes it relevant here are the reasons that Bissett suggests for this brief socialist success in Oklahoma:

Inherent in the experience of Oklahoma socialists ... was the joining of three important political and cultural traditions: (1) the Jeffersonian emphasis on the common man, the dignity of labor, and the importance of the land, brought by the Alliance and the Farmers’ Union into the twentieth century; (2) the scathing indictment of capitalism set down by Karl Marx and brought to America by his disciples; and (3) the evangelical Protestant tradition that had been central to the American experience since the Great Revival of the early nineteenth century. In the hands of Oklahoma Party members, this concoction proved to be both relevant and powerful. The Marxist message of class conflict blended easily with the Jeffersonian promise of yeoman democracy to produce an especially volatile mix that became even more compelling when instilled with the moral authority of Christianity.<sup>88</sup>

### Socialism, the American Communist Party and the Literary Left

It is with reference to the third of Jim Bissett’s suggested reasons that the American Communist Party and its literary output could be said to have failed where Oklahoma socialists succeeded. The atheism of communists was a reason why working-class Americans, particularly in the South, often distrusted them, and the Communist Party’s failure to address this issue was, certainly in hindsight, a mistake. Religion was deeply ingrained in much of American culture and for many Americans it would have seemed almost unpatriotic to reject the notion of a God. Moreover, the message of communism seemed extreme enough on its own, and the fact that it came with a need to change one’s religious beliefs was, for the majority of the

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<sup>86</sup> Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>87</sup> Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



populace, very possibly just too much to countenance. The second of Bissett's suggested reasons for the Oklahoma Socialists' success was something that communists did also do: attacking capitalism was clearly a core part of their mission. But the first of Bissett's reasons highlights another communist failing: they recognised the importance of the land only in economic terms and did not understand people's attachment to and reverence of it. Or perhaps more specifically, the Communist Party celebrated industrialisation but wanted to change the political model around which it operated, yet in doing so they failed to account for the large numbers of workers whose dream was the same as George and Lennie's in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937). George expresses this dream at various times in that novel: 'A little house and a couple of acres'.<sup>89</sup> 'An' it'd be our own, an' nobody could can us.'<sup>90</sup> Steinbeck demonstrates this ideal again in his 1936 novel *In Dubious Battle*: Lisa, one of the striking workers, responds to Doc's question about what would make her happy thus: 'I'd like to have a cow.... I like to have butter an' cheese like you can make'.<sup>91</sup> Doc teasingly jokes that this would be exploitation of the cow. However, it highlights the point that to some extent the Communist Party failed to take the American Dream and the Jeffersonian ideal into account; perhaps more importantly they failed to understand, or care, how many workers shared that dream. There is an irony here, one that can be easily missed, because as Hapke points out, 'to a considerable extent it seems that the goals of the CPUSA [Communist Party USA] were those of the American Dream, a secure job, happy family, and assurances against sickness, death, and old age.'<sup>92</sup>

These two particular failings of the Communist Party – the extreme view on religion and the failure to understand people's view of the land – will be explored in more detail when analysing the Gastonia novels of Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page, all of whom explore the impact of religion on the lives of their characters. Burke and Lumpkin in particular also analyse the emotional ties that people had to the land.

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<sup>89</sup> John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* [1937] (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 16.

<sup>90</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 58.

<sup>91</sup> John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* [1936] (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 258.

<sup>92</sup> Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 228.

In spite of these apparent failings, the American Communist Party did have an impact upon American society in the 1920s and 1930s, although it ultimately failed to ever win the support of enough people to change anything on a grand scale. Its failures were arguably mirrored by those who spoke on its behalf through literature, or at least those who controlled such output. Such people were, after all, members of the Communist Party and therefore followed its doctrines. Perhaps most well-known of those who spoke and wrote in support of communism was Mike Gold, founder and one-time editor of the left-wing journal *New Masses*, and himself a proletarian author. He was, according to Walter Rideout, introduced to the first American Writers' Congress in 1935 as 'the best loved American revolutionary writer',<sup>93</sup> although this is a view that would not have been shared by all. Laura Hapke describes Gold thus: 'Like [Anzia] Yeziarska..., Mike Gold was tenement bred on the Lower East Side [of Manhattan] and determined to write his way out of the ghetto. But he would not have seen self-involvement and desperate ambitions as the road to working-class art.'<sup>94</sup> In the early 1930s it was Gold who led the Communist Party's drive towards a 'proletarian culture' that would be shaped by proletarian art.<sup>95</sup> He articulated this ideal in a 1929 editorial entitled "Go Left, Young Writers!" in which he urged young proletarian authors not to be passive: 'Write. Your life in mine, mill and farm is of deathless significance in the history of America and the world. It may be literature – it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle.'<sup>96</sup> Gold was considered to be rather macho, as, it could be said, was much of the literary Left. He was extremely critical of liberals, and in his piece "America Needs a Critic" he cried out for the need of a man to lead the cause: "Send one who is not a pompous liberal, but a man of the street.... Send us a man fit to stand up to skyscrapers.... Send a man."<sup>97</sup> Myra Page states that 'his attitude was very anti-

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<sup>93</sup> Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* [1956] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 168.

<sup>94</sup> Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 185.

<sup>95</sup> Mike Gold quoted in Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 17-18.

<sup>96</sup> Mike Gold, *The Mike Gold Reader: from the writing of Mike Gold* (New York: International Publishers, 1954), 52.

<sup>97</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 35.

woman. He didn't think women or intellectuals should have much of a place.<sup>98</sup> Constance Coiner describes how 'Gold's version of proletarian realism demanded a "manly" style that would be lauded by "manly" critics'.<sup>99</sup> She also suggests that the absence of female authors from the debate about artistic direction in the movement is itself a telling comment 'on the patriarchal character of the literary Left',<sup>100</sup> and she explains simply that "the literary world, even on the Left, was chiefly a male preserve."<sup>101</sup> It should be noted, however, that among others Meridel Le Sueur, Grace Lumpkin, and Josephine Herbst were regular contributors to the *New Masses* in spite of this apparent male dominance.

Whether or not too much emphasis is placed on it, considerable evidence exists to indicate that the literary Left was both male-dominated and male chauvinist in outlook. Another male critic, Granville Hicks, was patronising and insulting in his summation of women writers, believing that 'they lack[ed] the courage to strike out into the world of strife' and that they were 'victims of timidity, and, as a result, even their failures are minor failures.'<sup>102</sup> Moreover, Marxism and communist theory itself has elements that can, when applied into practice, result in discrimination against women. One example of this, highlighted by Coiner, is 'Marxist theory of the primacy of production, which defines production as *the* distinctly human activity and encodes activities carried out in the home, to which women have historically been disproportionately consigned, as less valuable than men's outside it.'<sup>103</sup> Lenin, Coiner continues, referred to housework as 'petty', although it was in the context of arguing that women should not be enslaved by 'household drudgery'.<sup>104</sup> And, she states, Karl Marx himself stressed the importance of the labour question taking precedence over the 'woman question'.<sup>105</sup> Coiner quotes the thoughts of one former Party member who believed that the Party 'did not recognize the "double yoke" – or "double standard" of domestic labor – under

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<sup>98</sup> Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 110.

<sup>99</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 35.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>102</sup> Granville Hicks quoted in Coiner, *Better Red*, 36.

<sup>103</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 37.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

which women, and especially mothers, were exploited.’<sup>106</sup> It is this very ‘double yoke’ that is explored by the authors in this thesis.

The fact that communists did not fully include women in their scope was probably even more of a fatal folly on their part than the failure to recognise what many ordinary people actually believed in and wanted. Ironically, when the lot of communist men was compared to that of women, this failure to fully integrate women also left communist men open to the suggestion that they were in effect bourgeois. The ‘double yoke’ under which women struggled meant that they had no time to even contemplate political ideas, and many women certainly had no time to attend meetings and plan action; such a luxury was, in many cases, afforded only to men. The Party Line very much seems to have been to deal with bringing about the revolution first and dealing with other issues afterwards.

### Gastonia

Three of the novels to be studied in this thesis, Fielding Burke’s *Call Home the Heart*, Grace Lumpkin’s *To Make My Bread*, and Myra Page’s *Gathering Storm*, are at least partially focused on the 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina. Three other novels were written about the strike: *The Shadow Before* (1935) by William Rollins Jr.; *Beyond Desire* (1932) by Sherwood Anderson; and *Strike!* (1930) by Mary Heaton Vorse. These novels intertwine fact with fiction to explore the social and political contexts of the strike; they also study the lives of the former Appalachian mountain people involved in the events and consider their individual and collective responses to the situation.

Communist Party organizers, most notably Fred Beal, were involved in the strike action, and the organisation of the Loray Cotton Mill, the largest in the area, was seen by communists as being crucial as an opening into organising the South.<sup>107</sup>

Chuck McShane explains the reasons for the mill workers’ unrest:

The movement begins with the stretch-out, the term workers use for the combination of layoffs and working at a faster pace for less pay. While the rest of the economy roars into the 1920s, Southern textiles take a beating. The end of World War I means less need for uniforms. New fashions mean women want

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>107</sup> Mantooh, *You Factory Folks*, 1.

shorter skirts. Demand for fabric plummeted. Mill owners tighten control over their workers. Supervisors time each task and install “hank clocks” on looms and weaving machines, forcing a quicker pace for each worker.<sup>108</sup>

Loray was a ‘Yankee mill’; Northern money paid for over half its construction costs in 1900, and a Northern company held the deeds.<sup>109</sup> This fact helped to galvanize the workforce, which is described by Sylvia Jenkins Cook as follows:

Most of the workers in the Loray mill in Gastonia had originally been farmers and sharecroppers attracted by the prospects of ready cash: for over fifty years they had been coming into the city from the neighboring land, quietly and sullenly accepting long hours, low pay, and the necessary employment of all women and children. They were slow, patient, and long-suffering, in contrast to the readily violent hill folk who were later recruited by the mills from their remote and desperate poverty. In the city, they were isolated in their own mill villages, stigmatized by the rest of the community as factory trash, and given for their leisure and consolation churches and preachers generously aided by the employers.<sup>110</sup>

Poverty was rife in the mill villages of the South. Malnutrition led to cases of pellagra, and respiratory problems from breathing the cotton lint were common. Textile mill workers were already living in appalling conditions, with leaking roofs and earth pit toilets that would overflow into the streets.<sup>111</sup>

Fred Beal was organizing in Gastonia for the National Textile Workers’ Union (NTW), which had been established on 22 September, 1928 and included a woman, Ellen Dawson, as second vice-president and three women on the thirteen-member National Executive Committee.<sup>112</sup> Contradicting the idea that communists were too focused on men, the communist-led union saw the inclusion of women as central to its aims, believing that ‘without women we can win none of our struggles’;<sup>113</sup> the truth of this statement becomes even clearer when it is remembered that over half of textile workers at the time were women. Many workers felt betrayed by the general inaction of the United Textile Workers’ Union (UTW), which many felt had done little to organise and support textile workers

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<sup>108</sup> Chuck McShane, ‘The Loray Mill Strike in Gastonia,’ in *Our State: North Carolina*, <http://www.ourstate.com/loray-mill-strike/> (accessed 1 August 2015).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 87.

<sup>111</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 227.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 221-2.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 223.

against textile mill pay cuts in Willimantic, Connecticut in 1925.<sup>114</sup> As well as the appeal of the NTW to women, another issue that attracted workers to the NTW was a feeling that the UTW was too close to management and owners. The NTW believed in race and gender equality, contentious issues in the South at that time and issues that are explored in the Gastonia novels studied here. The NTW also believed in non-violence, an ideal that proved difficult to enforce among the former mountain folk but one that was largely followed by the strikers.

The Loray Mill strike resulted in two deaths, 'each,' as Mantooth explains, 'representing opposite sides of the struggle':<sup>115</sup> Gastonia's Chief of Police Orville F. Aderholt, killed in a raid on the strikers' camp, and striker Ella May Wiggins, mother, worker and ballad maker, shot while on her way to sing at a rally. The National Guard was used on the streets, and violence was used against the strikers. On the night of April 18, a mob of armed and masked men ransacked the union headquarters before destroying the Workers' International Relief Store.<sup>116</sup> While a number of strikers and organizers, including Beal, were charged and found guilty of the murder of Police Chief Alerholt in a controversial trial (the accused eventually fled to Russia while on bail pending appeal), Horace Wheelus and four others were acquitted in less than thirty minutes for the murder of Wiggins, and no one else was ever charged.<sup>117</sup>

The Loray Mill strike was ultimately unsuccessful in its aim to improve pay and conditions for workers at that time, but it did focus attention on Gastonia and on the treatment of mill workers. There were larger and more violent strikes during the interwar years in America, but a combination of the involvement of the Communist Party, the number of women playing a crucial role in the strike, and the killings of a police chief and an unarmed mill mother came together to create a place about which Jenkins Cook states this: 'In both the factual and the fictional history of the poor white in the thirties, no name has acquired a richer symbolic significance than that of Gastonia.'<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>115</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folk*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Foner, *Women and American Labor*, 233.

<sup>117</sup> Chuck McShane, 'The Loray Mill Strike in Gastonia', and Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 88-90.

<sup>118</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 85.

## **2: Terminology and Concepts**

Before looking more closely at the lives and writing of Anzia Yezierska, Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page, this chapter will make an exploration of the terminology that will be used and the concepts that will be engaged with in the thesis.

### **Working class**

What defines a person as being working class is very much open to debate. If it is considered as meaning one who works for wages then it will encompass the majority of people, both now and in the inter-war years. For the purpose of this thesis, the term will be used more specifically to refer those without a formal education who work for wages in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. In turn, a formal education will be taken as meaning graduating from High School, and usually going on to study at college full time in one's late teens and early twenties.

Unpaid work in the domestic sphere, most commonly housework in one's own home, the attendant activities that this involves outside the home, along with the work of raising children, occupied a large portion of poor women's time in 1920s and 1930s America, as it did long before this period and continued to do long after. Unpaid labour in this 'private' sphere, as compared with the 'public' sphere of politics and mainstream economic functioning,<sup>1</sup> is absolutely to be considered as work, but for ease of distinction in this thesis the term 'working women' will be used here to describe economically active women, or, in other words, those in paid employment. Unless preceded by a modifier denoting a different class, this term will also be used to mean working-class working women.

### **Sex and Gender**

With part of the thesis' focus being on how poor women's role in society is represented, the difference in what is meant by 'sex' and what is meant by 'gender' and how society reacts to these terms should be considered and clarified,

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<sup>1</sup> Nora Ruth Roberts, *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 16.

particularly in light of recent studies that provide scientific evidence which refutes the notion of a biological basis for human society's gender constructions. Amy S. Wharton uses the work of Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin when she provides a "working definition of gender": 'a "system of social practices"' which 'creates and maintains gender distinctions and ... "organizes relations of inequality on the basis of" these distinctions.'<sup>2</sup> She explains that 'in this view, gender involves the creation of both differences and inequalities', and she then builds on her definition, explaining that 'three features' of it 'are important to keep in mind':

First, gender is as much a process as a fixed state. This implies that gender is being continually produced and reproduced.... Second, gender is not simply a characteristic of individuals, but occurs at all levels of the social structure. This is contained in the idea of gender as a "system" of practices that are far-reaching, interlocked, and that exist independently of individuals. Gender is thus a multilevel phenomenon.... This insight allows us to explore how social processes, such as interaction, and social institutions, such as work, embody and reproduce gender. Third, this definition of gender refers to its importance in organizing relations of inequality.<sup>3</sup>

Wharton also makes the important point that 'gender itself is *relational*: Understanding what women are or can be ... requires attention to what men are or can be.'<sup>4</sup> Notions of femininity and masculinity are integral to this thesis, as is another of Wharton's observations: 'While gender, race and ethnicity, and social class are analytically separate, as aspects of lived experience, they are highly intertwined.'<sup>5</sup> These points appear to build on the work of Simone de Beauvoir who, in her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949), asks 'What is a woman?' and explains that 'although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented. It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from a clairvoyant's vocabulary.'<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir also explains the difficulty of defining gender: 'If I want to define myself, I first have to say, 'I am a woman'; all other assertions will rise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious.'<sup>7</sup> Tracing the history of women's

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<sup>2</sup> Amy S. Wharton, *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Wharton, *The Sociology of Gender*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* [1949] (London: Vintage, 2011), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 5.



representation as somehow ‘other’, she quotes Aristotle: “the female is female by virtue of a certain *lack of qualities*”.<sup>8</sup> She expands on this point, explaining that ‘humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. “Woman, the relative being,” writes Michelet.’<sup>9</sup>

Attempting to understand gender more clearly, the difficulties presented when attempting to analyse the difference, if any, between sex and gender are explored further by Amy Wharton. She quotes Hoyenga and Hoyenga in saying that “We are the products of both our biologies and our past and present environments, simultaneously and inseparably; we are bodies as well as minds at one and the same time.”<sup>10</sup> Wharton then discusses this idea:

This view – that biology and society interact to shape human behavior – may not seem controversial, but researchers disagree over exactly how this interaction should be understood. In sex the biological and genetic substrate from which gender distinctions emerge, or do gender distinctions lead us to perceive two, easily distinguishable sexes? Is sexual dimorphism itself a social construction?<sup>11</sup>

Wharton outlines the two positions held in this discussion, and explores the ‘disagreement over the *degree to which they see sex as socially constructed*. At one end of the spectrum’, she states, ‘are those who believe that gender is not grounded in any biological or genetic surface or landscape on which a social symbolism is imprinted.... First we have social understandings of what men and women are, or should be, and then we perceive sex differences.’<sup>12</sup> A sex category is assigned at birth, but ‘people continue to categorize one other as males or females throughout life.’<sup>13</sup> However, clothing means that the genitals are usually covered, leaving people to ‘rely on other “markers” to assign a sex category. These markers may include physical characteristics, such as hair, body type, or voice, or they may include aspects of dress, mannerisms, or behavior.’<sup>14</sup> These markers are often cultural, hair length and dress being two obvious examples of this fact. Wharton

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Wharton, *The Sociology of Gender*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 21.

adds further complications to the issue by again quoting from Kessler and McKenna: “Consider a list of items that differentiate males from females. There are none that always and without exception are true of only one gender. No behavioral characteristics (e.g., crying, or physical aggression) is always present or never present for one gender. Neither can physical characteristics – either visible (e.g., beards), unexposed (e.g., genitals), or normally unexamined (e.g., gonads) – always differentiate the genders”.<sup>15</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are those who hold what are ‘sometimes referred to as biosocial perspectives’ which ‘treat sex as objectively, identifiable “real” distinctions between males and females that are rooted in human physiology, anatomy, and genetics. These distinctions become the raw material from which gender is constructed.’<sup>16</sup>

Wharton holds the view that it is ‘impossible to neatly separate the realm of sex from that of gender when we are trying to explain any aspect of social life’<sup>17</sup> and she chooses to use the word ‘gender’ rather than ‘sex’ or ‘sex category’. This difference of opinion on the question of how to define sex and gender is a good example of how once an issue or idea is analysed in any depth, it can be extremely difficult to draw a conclusion or provide a concrete answer, even when that issue appeared on the surface to be rather simple.

The views on the question of sex and gender held by Francine D. Blau, Marianne A. Ferber and Anne E. Winkler further develop analysis of this difficulty:

It has become increasingly common to use the term ‘sex’ to refer to the biological differences between males and females, and ‘gender’ to encompass the distinctions society has erected on this biological base. Thus, ‘gender’ connotes a cultural construct, including distinctions in role and behaviors as well as mental and emotional characteristics.<sup>18</sup>

The distinction between sex and gender, if indeed one can be made, pertains directly to this study because a number of the female characters challenge the assumption that men and women have fixed gender traits based on their sex. American society has for a long time recognized males as occupying the dominant

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>18</sup> Blau, Francine D., Marianne A. Ferber, and Anne E. Winkler, *The Economics of Women, Men, and Work* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), 6.

'hunter' role, with females in the submissive 'nurture' role of mothers. In 1998, Steven P. Schacht and Doris W. Ewing expounded on this point thus:

To many the values, characteristics, and ways of being associated with men and the masculine are seen as dominant and inherently superior to those associated with women and the feminine. Accordingly, men are seen as the rightful leaders of society while women are seen as natural subordinates.<sup>19</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir makes the point that 'biological and social sciences no longer believe there are immutably determined entities that define given characteristics like those of the woman...; science considers characteristics as secondary reactions to a *situation*'.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, although the 'popular perception ... has often been that investigations of male and female roles among nonhuman species provided support for the view that biology is destiny',<sup>21</sup> a view that supports the dominant male theory, animals do not, in fact, always conform to these expectations. Francine Blau et al. consider this point further:

A number of correctives to anthropomorphic models of male dominance and aggressiveness, and of female passivity and nurturance, have been found in new studies of various animal groups. Many of them show evidence of "female dominance, autonomy, and power; of male nurturance and co-operation; and of monogamous behavior as well as promiscuity in both males and females.... Among chimpanzees, the most socially advanced nonhuman primates, females do not appear to occupy a subordinate position. Haremlike groups with dominant males are entirely unknown."<sup>22</sup>

The authors also point to studies undertaken on 'lower animals' that also find animals not conforming to the expectations of the dominant male theory, and this further demonstrates how 'sweeping generalisations are rarely justified'.<sup>23</sup> Many spider species provide an example of so-called lower animals that invert the notion of male superiority: in species such as the wolf spider, the female often eats the male after mating, and in some cases have been seen to do so before mating occurs. Such examples support the notion that gender in humans is a social construct, and this scientific context provides crucial evidence against the idea that

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<sup>19</sup> Steven P. Schacht and Doris W. Ewing, eds., *Feminism and Men: Reconstructing Gender Relations* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Blau, et al., *The Economics of Women, Men, and Work*, 13-14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

male superiority is the unquestionable natural order. Simone de Beauvoir had, in 1949, already written on this point:

Man projects all females at once on to woman. And the fact is that she is a Female. But if one wants to stop thinking in commonplaces, two questions arise. What does the female represent in the animal kingdom? And what unique kind of female is realised in woman?... Males and females are two types of individuals who are differentiated within one species for the purposes of reproduction; they can be defined only correlatively. But it has to be pointed out first that the very meaning of division of the species into two sexes is not clear. It does not occur universally in nature.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, as well as demonstrating that male superiority is not universal in the natural world, there is a further fact that challenges the idea that male dominance is the norm: human beings have evolved like no other animal species and there is nothing 'normal' about the way humans exist; the fact that humans have developed an intellect and can use reason makes arguments about what is 'natural' somewhat void.

Analysing in detail the ways in which 'social interaction[s] help produce gender distinctions and inequalities', Amy Wharton uses status characteristics theory to offer 'a straightforward answer: Because interaction requires that people orient themselves to one another, it is necessary to have some basis for categorizing others *vis-[ag]-vis* oneself. In Risman's words: "Gender is something we do in order to make social life more manageable".<sup>25</sup> The point is that we are something more than just animal, and attempts to define human male and females using other creatures is problematic and simplistic, as has been demonstrated here. The words of Beauvoir can be used to conclude this argument: 'It must be repeated again that within the human collectivity nothing is natural, and woman, among others, is a product developed by civilization; the intervention of others in her destiny is originary: if this process were driven in another way, it would produce a very different result.'<sup>26</sup>

These points about sex and gender are important in relation to the texts to be studied here: characters like Dolly in Page's *Daughter of the Hills*, Sonya in Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*, and Ishma in Burke's *Call Home the Heart*

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<sup>24</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Wharton, *The Sociology of Gender*, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 777.

challenge society's preconceived notions of gender and gender roles; moreover, the rejection of the dominant male theory informs the approach of the authors being studied and the analysis made of that writing in the thesis.

### **Women's Writing**

Studies by Dale Spender on the nature of verbal conversation revealed that 'the salient characteristic of women's talk in conversation with men was *silence*'.<sup>27</sup> This supports the views of Helene Cixous regarding women's writing. In her 1976 essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', she encourages women to 'write her self: ... [to] write about women and bring women to writing'.<sup>28</sup> She states that the world of writing is one in which 'woman has never had *her* turn to speak – this being all the more unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures'.<sup>29</sup> Cixous, like the female authors studied here, believes that writing can be a force for change in society. Her view of women's writing as traditionally being treated differently to men's is echoed by Nancy Armstrong, who feels that 'female writing – writing that was considered appropriate for or could be written by women – is in fact designated itself as feminine, which meant that other writing, by implication, was understood as male'.<sup>30</sup> Armstrong discusses the use of Latin as an 'initiation rite'<sup>31</sup> for educated men – a special, exclusive language that would set them apart. While Cixous is calling for a feminine language, she does not want one of the type that Armstrong is describing, one that willingly subordinates itself to men's language. Cixous, while describing how a woman speaking at a public gathering 'throws her trembling body forward' and 'her flesh speaks true',<sup>32</sup> accepts that 'it is impossible to *define* a

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<sup>27</sup> Dale Spender, *The Writing or the Sex?: or why you don't have to read women's writing to know it's no good* (New York, Pergamon Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* v. 1, no. 4 (1976): 875.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 879.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy Armstrong, 'The Rise of Female Authority in the Novel' in *Feminism: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies, Volume 2: Feminism and modernity*, ed. Mary Evans (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 67.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Cixous, 'Medusa', 881.

feminine practice of writing', and she believes that 'this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean it doesn't exist.'<sup>33</sup> However, despite the lack of a definition, she calls for a feminine practice of writing, one which she believes will require women to overcome fears 'that language conceals an invincible adversary, because it's the language of men and their grammar'<sup>34</sup> (echoing Armstrong's point about Latin), and one that 'cannot fail to be more than subversive' because 'it is volcanic'.<sup>35</sup> She wants women to move beyond seeing themselves as lacking because they have no phallus; rather, she wants them to find strength in their bodies and use that strength in their writing.

While they are all subversive, the women authors in this thesis emphasise the role of the female body to varying degrees. Yeziarska's writing has definite elements of it, especially in *Salome of the Tenements*, concerned as the protagonist Sonya is with feminine beauty and fashion. Burke's writing has a sense of it through her descriptions of Ishma's majestic beauty and also her physical strength. Lumpkin and Page do not write with the same level of focus on the female body as Yeziarska and Burke, and their fictions are far more removed from Cixous' thoughts about her writing: 'it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me'.<sup>36</sup>

Cixous seems to be calling on women to celebrate themselves, not as *other*, for they are not *other*, but simply as themselves. The sense is that women should move beyond being seen as *other* in relative terms with men; for as Beauvoir points out, 'psychoanalysis fails to explain why woman is the *other*. Even Freud accepts that the prestige of the penis is explained by the father's sovereignty, and he admits that he does not know the source of male supremacy.'<sup>37</sup>

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is another critic who analyses an important gap in the theories of Freud, and in this case also Marx: 'we might chart the itinerary of womb-envy in the production of a theory of consciousness: the idea of the womb as

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 883.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 887.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 888.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 893.

<sup>37</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 59.

a place of production is avoided both in Marx and in Freud.<sup>38</sup> Spivak calls for a redefinition of male-centred presumptions about the whole notion of what ‘woman’ means, even though she states that ‘no rigorous definition of anything is ultimately possible, so that if one wants to, one could go on deconstructing the opposition between man and woman, and finally show that it is a binary opposition that displaces itself.’<sup>39</sup>

Spivak goes on to raise questions that are engaged with to an extent by the female authors to be studied here. Discussing ‘the situation of the domestic workplace’, which she says ‘is not one of “pure exchange”’, Spivak asks: ‘What is the use-value of unremunerated woman’s work for husband or family? Is the willing insertion into the wage structure a curse or a blessing? How should we fight the idea, universally accepted by men, that wages are the only mark of value-producing work?.... What would be the implications of denying women entry into the capitalist economy?’<sup>40</sup> With reference to the notion of production in writing, Tania Modleski points out that ‘too often politically-oriented criticism invokes “production” as an ideal pure and simple, without concerning itself with what is being produced.’<sup>41</sup> She analyses Ann Douglas’s criticism of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in which Douglas condemns Stowe ‘for allowing readers to become “absorbed” in her thrilling novel (i.e. to consume it) despite the fact that she was presenting them with an ideology based upon a feminine mode of production and intended “to effect a radical transformation of ... society”’.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Modleski expounds, ‘such a view exposes the masculinist bias of much politically-oriented criticism that adopts metaphors of production and consumption in order to differentiate between progressive and regressive activities of reading (or viewing, as the case may be).’<sup>43</sup>

The fact that Grace Lumpkin and Myra Page held to something of a Communist Party line in their writing complicates the issues raised here because

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<sup>38</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 80.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>41</sup> Tania Modleski, ‘Femininity as mas(s)querade: a feminist approach to mass culture,’ in *Feminism: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies, Volume 2: Feminism and modernity*, ed. Mary Evans (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 325.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

they were women following a male-dominated approach to literature. This fact does, however, make for interesting contrasts between their writing and that of Fielding Burke, whose approach with regard to gender was more mixed, and Anzia Yezierska, whose writing definitely celebrates powerful femininity.

### **The Male Gaze**

The notion of the male gaze is connected directly to the role that sex and gender play in assigning cultural roles for men and women. This is particularly true if gender is taken to be a cultural construct.

Until relatively recent times in Europe and America, men controlled the narrative and dictated the terms upon which the world is represented in art, literature and music. Consciously or otherwise, the male viewpoint, the male gaze on women, has been the only viewpoint, the only gaze. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states that ‘the modern world, in particular our era, is ocularcentric; it depends on sight as the primary sensory conduit to the world’.<sup>44</sup> She expounds on the literal side of this point, staring itself, and highlights the complexities that it raises:

Human dominance staring is usually more complex than chest pounding. Often staring as a manifestation of dominance veils aggression with a restraint enabled by the hierarchy the staring enacts. In other words, a harsh stare can do the work of a foot on the neck because the subordinate accedes to the system of the domination that is in place. Take, for example, the much analyzed concept of the male gaze, which feminism has fruitfully elaborated. The male gaze is a position of privilege in social relations which entitles men to look at women and positions women as objects of that look. As John Berger succinctly puts it: “men act, women appear” (1972, 47). In other words, the male gaze is men doing something to women.... Nonetheless, cultural narratives ... can obscure the male gaze’s endorsement of gender dominance. Both individual intention and reception of the male gaze can thus depart from gender scripts, as for example when women relish the arousing aspects of being the object of the male stare or men intend their stares as affirming feminine attractiveness.... This theory of a regulating visual dynamic describes masculine and feminine positions, not necessarily actual people. Not all men can or do exercise the male gaze, and women are often posed to cast a surveying look on themselves – as before the mirror, for example – or to identify with the male position, as in watching another woman in a movie.... We internalize and identify with the gender system’s requirements in the same way that the modern subject described by Michel Foucault (1979) agrees to

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<sup>44</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.



self-monitoring. In other words, the male gaze as a form of dominance staring makes us into men and women.<sup>45</sup>

Elaine Aston also discusses the male gaze, emphasizing the male-centred nature of representation in 'art, cinema, media, advertising, theatre, etc.'<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the cultural fields that she identifies are the primary channels through which most people in the Western world receive information about the world around them; if such channels are filtered only through a male gaze, then the view that even gender itself is a social construct becomes easier to understand. In trying to better comprehend the male dominance in these cultural fields, Aston refers to De Lauretis to highlight that 'feminist analysis of representation has identified the oppressive discourse of engendered representation which constructs and positions "woman" as "the other-from-man"'.<sup>47</sup> She builds further on this point by using the work of Jacqueline Rose to explain that 'understanding how the feminine subject is constructed, examining feminine sexuality, "goes beyond psychoanalysis to feminism, as part of its questioning of how that sexuality comes to be defined"'.<sup>48</sup> Referring to the work of Jacques Lacan, whom she says 'proposed a reframing of Freud',<sup>49</sup> Aston explains that 'Lacan claimed that subjectivity is constructed through the linguistic sign-system of language. In the Lacanian system the point at which the child enters language is metaphorically represented as the "mirror stage".... The entry into languages constitutes the entry into an external order which constructs the child's identity.'<sup>50</sup> And with this 'entry into language' comes an 'entry into ... the Symbolic Order.... which privileges the male at the expense of the female'.<sup>51</sup> This in effect creates the 'binary opposition of Woman as "Other" than Man',<sup>52</sup> a theory expounded by Hélène Cixous.

If the manipulations of the media are seen simply as a crass extension of the arts and as a form of propaganda, then the need to understand the notion of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>46</sup> Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 45.

male gaze becomes even more of a necessity. Although the world is changing fast, and it could be argued that in the early twenty-first century a female gaze is becoming evident, the novels to be studied in this thesis are of the interwar years, and as such they mark a bold attempt to frame issues from a female perspective at that time, an already difficult undertaking made even more so by the male-chauvinistic opinions held by many of the leading voices on the political left.

### **Propaganda**

Defining what is meant by the word propaganda is difficult, but it is important to the aims of this thesis because a number of the texts being studied are considered to have propagandist elements. A. P. Foulkes notes that ‘the recognition of propaganda can be seen as a function of the ideological distance which separates the observer from the act of communication observed’,<sup>53</sup> though he further states that ‘this principle cannot be made to yield a formal definition of propaganda, for it is in the first place a statement about the subjectivity of perception and the relationship of perception to the values, beliefs and assumptions of the group or community with which the individual identifies.’<sup>54</sup> Describing the twentieth century as ‘the Age of Propaganda’,<sup>55</sup> Foulkes states that it has become ‘difficult to isolate and identify propaganda as a generally recognizable and describable phenomenon.’<sup>56</sup> After discussing Jacques Ellul’s notion of ‘paper tigers’ – the type of propaganda that most people can easily identify because it is simply propaganda of ideas and interests ‘directly opposed to their own’<sup>57</sup> – he identifies a far more dangerous technique for the dissemination of ideas:

What ... [many people] fail to see is that the interests they perceive as being attacked by inimical propaganda may themselves be the product of propagandist processes far more subtle than the ones employed by the ‘other side’. It is above all this invisible propaganda, which in its most successful form establishes and perpetuates itself as the common-sense of an individual or

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<sup>53</sup> A. P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

group, which led Ellul to write of the serious ‘danger of man’s destruction by propaganda’.<sup>58</sup>

The word ‘propaganda’ has an interesting history. David Welch claims that it ‘has become a portmanteau word, which can be interpreted in a number of different ways. With rapidly changing technology, definitions of propaganda have also undergone changes. Propaganda has meant different things at different times.’<sup>59</sup> According to Mark Crispin Miller, it was ‘little used in English’<sup>60</sup> prior to World War I, but its origins lie in the Reformation, when in 1622 Pope Gregory XV created the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Holy Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) to help defend the Catholic Church against the rise of Protestantism across Europe; in 1627 this Holy Congregation became The College of Propaganda.<sup>61</sup> Welch points to World War I as the moment of what he calls propaganda’s ‘first use by governments in an organised, quasi-scientific manner’, though he acknowledges that ‘the use of war propaganda dates back 2,400 years to Sun-Tzu’s *The Art of War*’.<sup>62</sup> The word tends to be seen in a negative light nowadays, a view that Miller and Welch agree began in the 1920s when, as the true horrors of the Great War became widely known, propaganda became, according to Welch, ‘associated with lies and falsehood.... It was, as one official wrote in the 1920s, “a good word gone wrong”’.<sup>63</sup> Miller finds evidence in the works of Emerson to support this idea that propaganda was not always viewed as a word with ‘demonic implications’:<sup>64</sup> ‘In his *English Traits* (1856)... Emerson uses *propagandist* as an adjective not at all suggestive of the stealthy spread of some pernicious creed or notion.’<sup>65</sup> Miller also highlights the historical unimportance of the word when he states that ‘there is no definition for it in the great 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* (which does include a short entry for *propagate*).’<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> David Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: from World War I to Wikileaks* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 3.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Crispin Miller, ‘Introduction,’ in *Propaganda* by Edward Bernays [1928] (New York, Ig Publishing, 2005), 9.

<sup>61</sup> Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*, 4

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>64</sup> Miller in *Propaganda*, 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 11.

Propaganda has been treated separately from agitation by some, a distinction that David Welch believes 'dates back to Georgi Plekhanov's celebrated 1892 definition: "A propagandist presents *many* ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents *only one* or *a few* ideas, but presents them to a *whole* mass of people".<sup>67</sup> Welch discusses the way in which the Bolsheviks made this distinction but the Nazis did not. The two ideas are often used to form the compound term 'agit-prop' to describe certain types of art, but besides the obvious connotation of linking agitation and propaganda, this term could be said to make a distinction not so much between agitation and propaganda but as one between types of propaganda. This idea can be developed by analysing Foulkes discussion of Ellul's views when presenting his take on the difference between what he calls agitation and integration: 'the propaganda of *agitation* is usually subversive and oppositional.... It can be understood as a call for action, whereas the propaganda of *integration* ... is more properly regarded as a process designed to produce inertia, or at least conformity. Both agitation and integration propaganda can be *vertical*, in the sense that they can emanate from a leader seeking to influence the masses, or they can be *horizontal*, i.e. made "inside the group".<sup>68</sup> This notion of horizontal and vertical propaganda is important when considering the works to be studied here because the three Gastonia novelists could be said to be obeying vertical agitation propaganda from the Communist Party, but attempting to then spread that propaganda vertically. The content of these novels also features examples of how the spread of propaganda from institutions such as churches, particularly those churches in the pay of mill owners, influences the poor white working class.

Edward Bernays, a man who worked for the American government and has been described by Welch as 'the father of modern advertising',<sup>69</sup> states in his book *Propaganda* that 'the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinion of the masses is an important element in a democratic society.'<sup>70</sup> This notion of a 'conscious and intelligent manipulation' is a fairly decent definition of what propaganda is; the use of the word 'manipulation' might have negative

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<sup>67</sup> Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Bernays, *Propaganda*, 37.

connotations, but the word can simply mean to handle something and move or arrange it. Welch concludes his essay entitled 'Opening Pandora's Box' with the important point that 'propaganda is ethically neutral – it can be good or bad.'<sup>71</sup> However, Nancy Snow, an ex-United States Information Agency (USIA) employee, describes the way in which propaganda operates in terms which certainly makes it sound 'bad': 'With propaganda, you don't need facts *per se*, just the best facts put forward. If these facts make sense to people, then you don't need proof like one might need in a courtroom.'<sup>72</sup> Welch quotes the *New York Times* from 1 September 1937 to sum up the issue of propaganda use: "'What is truly vicious is not propaganda but a monopoly of it.'"<sup>73</sup> He then suggests that 'perhaps more focus should be placed on the intention behind the propaganda and not exclusively on the propaganda itself. Understanding the 'message' also requires widening access to information in order that *informed* opinion can be shaped.'<sup>74</sup>

In the process of this brief study of the history and uses of the words propaganda and agitation, a description of sorts has been found. Propaganda is about the spread of ideas. Yet this description could also be used for much art, leading to the discussion that will follow about the nature of propaganda and its relationship with art. It seems, however, that propaganda is about the way in which ideas are disseminated; more specifically, propaganda involves a 'conscious and intelligent manipulation'<sup>75</sup> of the way people think. Again, though, this definition could well be applied to art. Nonetheless, using this and the other definitions of propaganda suggested here, there can be little doubt that a number of the novels to be studied in this thesis have propagandist elements. Moreover, they were written in a time when access to information was far more limited than it is today, and almost all that information was filtered through newspaper and radio controllers. Considering the 'intention behind the propaganda' is an important point, for it could certainly be argued that left wing voices were in a very small minority in inter-war years America (or America at any time) and so the intention of a novelist to portray

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<sup>71</sup> Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Nancy Snow quoted in Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Bernays, *Propaganda*, 37.

a different point of view to that of the mainstream was a noble one. But as mentioned, this discussion raises another important but complex issue, namely the relationship between propaganda and art.

### **Propaganda and Art**

Having considered what might be meant by the word propaganda, it is crucial to consider the relationship between propaganda and art, in particular the art of literature. It could be said that propaganda differs from art in that art imitates whereas propaganda seeks to lead. Yet this definition is unsatisfactory because distinction is not that simple. Art very often seeks to lead – and perhaps this is the very point of this discussion: art and propaganda are not easy to distinguish from each other, and in fact it may well be impossible to make such a distinction.

For a start, besides trying to define propaganda, any attempt to define art or literature is an enormous undertaking. Literature can perhaps be defined as writing that seeks to study the human condition; this is, however, a rather loose description and one open to many interpretations. As A. P. Foulkes points out, ‘traditionally ... it has been customary to divide literature into “good” works and “bad” works. The aesthetic criteria on which such judgements are based are not clearly established, and indeed the history of literature is littered with arguments concerning the relative “greatness” or otherwise of individual authors and texts.’<sup>76</sup> Defining what gives writing a sense of ‘literariness’ is also very difficult. Literariness can be judged by the use of language – writing that tends towards the poetic can be classed as being literary and therefore artistic; however, literariness can also be judged by the content – writing that explores what it means to be human can also be classed as literary. As with attempts to define propaganda, perhaps the important point is to consider what might cause a piece of writing to be defined as literary rather than to be overly concerned with reaching a definitive method of classifying literature.

Furthermore, the question of what should be in the canon of literature, if indeed any such canon should even exist, is an ongoing debate. Complicating the

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<sup>76</sup> Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, 12.

issue further, George Orwell states that 'all art is to some extent propaganda',<sup>77</sup> an echo of what W. E. B. Du Bois famously states in his 1926 essay 'Criteria of Negro Art':

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent....<sup>78</sup>

Analysing Du Bois' statement 'I do not care a damn for any art that is not propaganda', Keith E. Byerman points out that when read in isolation it appears to show Du Bois taking 'an unequivocal ideological position.'<sup>79</sup> But Byerman emphasises that 'it is important ... to put this paragraph in the framework of the whole essay and to test the theory against Du Bois's actual literary practice',<sup>80</sup> moreover, he believes that 'doing so reveals a complex aesthetic position.'<sup>81</sup>

The opening of Du Bois' essay 'Negro Art', written in 1921, five years before 'Criteria of Negro Art', obfuscates the apparent clarity of his position and provides evidence for Byerman's assertion that Du Bois's position was more nuanced than it first appears:

Negro art is today plowing a difficult row, chiefly because we shrink at the portrayal of the truth about ourselves. We are so used to seeing the truth distorted ... that whenever we are portrayed on canvas, in story or on the stage, as simply human with human frailties, we rebel. We want everything that is said about us to tell the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one. This is wrong and in the end it is harmful. We have a right, in our effort to get just treatment, to insist that we produce something of the best in human character and that it is unfair to judge us by our criminals and prostitutes. This is justifiable propaganda. On the other hand we face the Truth of Art. We have criminals and prostitutes, ignorant and debased elements just as all folk have. When the artist paints us he has a right to paint us whole and not ignore everything which is not as perfect as we would wish it to be.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>78</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois quoted in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 328.

<sup>79</sup> Keith E. Byerman, *Seizing the Word: History, art, and Self in the Work of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), 101.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Du Bois quoted in *The Oxford Du Bois Reader*, 310.

It seems that in this essay, Du Bois is suggesting that all art should not be only propaganda, and that in fact what he calls the 'Truth of Art' should be encouraged. Such truth can, as he notes, be used by some to reinforce stereotypes, yet it can lead ultimately to a work of art that is far more realistic because it does not 'portray a world of stilted black folk such as never were'<sup>83</sup>. If the word 'black' in the previous sentence is replaced by 'poor white' or something similar then the relevance to the proletarian literature of this thesis becomes very clear. Conversely, this point highlights the failure of much proletarian literature to focus enough of its attention on the issues of black people, a failure which reflects the wider political problem that the Left had regarding integration. Du Bois' words also raise yet again the overlap between and interlinking of art and propaganda. This issue is raised not only because of Du Bois' own apparently contradictory statements but also because his words force the reader to consider what kind of art would make the best propaganda.

Du Bois is speaking about a group of people who are disenfranchised and oppressed by the wider society, and although the plight of the black working poor was eminently worse than that of poor whites, the language he uses is reminiscent of that used in the writing of the authors to be studied here. They portray the attitude of many people in the wider society towards the poor white factory workers in Gastonia, or in the case of Anzia Yezierska the situation of being seen as 'white other' because of her characters' religious faith. An example of this similarity in language use is found when Du Bois states that 'We fear that evil in us will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual.'<sup>84</sup> Evil in the poor was often labelled as a class problem while, as Du Bois says, in others it was viewed as individual. Moreover, the fear of criticism that black artists felt might be directed towards them if they 'paint[ed] the truth' is redolent of the calls by Mike Gold and Leon Trotsky that left-wing writers should strive for a proletarian realism. Du Bois's thoughts highlight the universality of human suffering and, more specifically, the way in which a section of society that has been oppressed by a power-holding section of society should react to that oppression through the arts.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Du Bois quoted in *The Oxford Du Bois Reader*, 310.



Speaking in 1941 on the BBC Overseas Service and commenting on the literature of the previous ten years, George Orwell opined that it had 'been swamped by propaganda'.<sup>85</sup> He comments upon what he calls 'the characteristic writers of the time, people like Auden and Spender and MacNeice' and states that they 'have been didactic, political writers, aesthetically conscious ... but more interested in subject-matter than in technique.'<sup>86</sup> In this statement he could quite easily have included three of the four authors from this thesis, namely Burke, Lumpkin, and Page, although there is artistic merit to their work, too. This connection to these female novelists is even more true of his next statement: 'Marxist writers ... look upon every book virtually as a political pamphlet and are far more interested in digging out its political and social implications than in its literary qualities in the narrow sense.'<sup>87</sup> Orwell compares writers of the thirties with those of the period before, which he defines as 'from about 1890 onwards' and throughout which he believes that 'the notion that form is more important than subject-matter, the notion of "art for art's sake", had been taken for granted.'<sup>88</sup> He believes that the reason for this fact is that even the Great War did not really disturb the belief that 'civilisation would last forever',<sup>89</sup> a security that led to art for art's sake. In Orwell's opinion, it was 'Hitler and the slump' that 'shattered' this 'sense of security', and he stated that 'writers who have come up since 1930 have been living in a world in which not only one's life but one's whole scheme of values is constantly menaced. In such circumstances detachment is not possible. You cannot take a purely aesthetic interest in a disease you are dying from'.<sup>90</sup>

Orwell concludes with a balanced view on the relationship between propaganda and art. The political writing of the 1930s, he says,

destroyed the illusion of pure aestheticism. It reminded us that propaganda in some form or other lurks in every book, that every work of art has a meaning and a purpose—a political, social and religious purpose—and that our aesthetic judgements are always coloured by our prejudices and beliefs. It debunked art

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<sup>85</sup> George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 2: My Country Right or Left, 1940–1943*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 123

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-4.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

for art's sake. But it also led for the time being into a blind alley, because it caused countless young writers to try to tie their minds to a political discipline which, if they had stuck to it, would have made mental honesty impossible. The only system of thought open to them at that time was official Marxism, which demanded a nationalistic loyalty towards Russia and forced the writer who called himself a Marxist to be mixed up in the dishonesties of power politics. And even if that was desirable, the assumptions that these writers built upon were suddenly shattered by the Russo-German Pact. Just as many writers about 1930 had discovered that you cannot really be detached from contemporary events, so many writers about 1939 were discovering that you cannot really sacrifice your intellectual integrity for the sake of a political creed—or at least you cannot do so and remain a writer.<sup>91</sup>

Orwell's conclusion is simple, yet it confirms that there is no clear answer to defining the relationship between propaganda and art. 'Aesthetic scrupulousness is not enough, but political rectitude is not enough either', he resolves. Writing in 1983, Foulkes, as already mentioned, makes a similar point on the subject: 'The relationship of literature and art to propaganda is not at all straightforward';<sup>92</sup> he adds, however, that many 'modern critics' would use their 'evaluative criteria' to make a 'distinction between "real literature" and "tendentious" writing.'<sup>93</sup> Such a distinction would not be helpful because it would simply mean separating out and classing writing based on the opinion of the time, and would in any case lead back to what Orwell was attempting to look beyond; in other words, it would make simplistic separations that lead to what Orwell called blind alleys.

There is one simple conclusion from all this: no simple distinction can or perhaps even should be made between propaganda and art. However, the point is perhaps that while any such distinction will ultimately never be possible, it is the search for a distinction that constitutes the answer. Perhaps a better way of thinking about the relationship between the two is that propaganda is often associated with a reductive or limited variety of interpretations and art with an open range of possible meanings; yet neither view is monolithic. Questioning the intentions of art and literature, seeking an understanding of them, and keeping in mind the notion of a search for universal truths about the human condition will allow a reader to remain alert to propagandist elements in literature, while

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, 2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

understanding that there is meaning in everything (even in definitions of words like 'meaning') and so there is the possibility that any piece of art can alter the opinion of the person reading or seeing or hearing or interpreting it. Or put in more simple terms, the most effective art could also be the most effective propaganda.

### **Proletarian Art**

What constitutes proletarian art is a question that prompted much debate within the literary Left movement of the inter-war years. One side followed Trotsky's viewpoint that the proletariat would not have time to develop a true proletarian art before the time that the struggle would end and the proletariat would be 'dissolved into a Socialist community and ... free itself from its class characteristics and thus cease to be a proletariat';<sup>94</sup> the other side supported the belief of, among others, Mike Gold that authors should strive only for proletarian realism, which he explains as follows:

Proletarian realism deals with the *real conflicts* of men and women who work for a living. It has nothing to do with the sickly mental states of the idle Bohemians, their subtleties, their sentimentalities, their fine-spun affairs.... We know the suffering of hungry, persecuted and heroic millions is enough of a theme for anyone, without inventing these precious silly little agonies.<sup>95</sup>

Trotsky did also call 'for a literature of "realism," an "artistic affirmation of the real world with its flesh and blood and also with its will and consciousness"'; the crucial difference between his viewpoint and that of Gold, however, was that Trotsky 'stressed that this realism "may be of many kinds"'.<sup>96</sup>

The use of the term 'realism' is itself problematic, and what is meant by it must be examined. Lacan called 'the real, the symbolic and the imaginary the "three registers of human reality"' and believed that the real is simply that which isn't symbolized: it is "that which resists symbolization absolutely."<sup>97</sup> Using this definition of what is real, no art, and therefore no literature, can ever be so called real or realistic, for all art is by its very nature representing and symbolizing even when it

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<sup>94</sup> Leon Trotsky, quoted in Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>95</sup> Mike Gold, quoted in Coiner, *Better Red*, 24.

<sup>96</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 17.

<sup>97</sup> Darian Leader and Judy Greaves, *Introducing Lacan* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2005), 61.

seeks to be realistic. However, this does not preclude art from being realistic in so far as art can be interested in and concerned with what is real; instead, it means that there should be an awareness that the use of the terms 'realistic' and 'realism' are laden with various potential interpretations and meanings.

The artistic divide in the Party mirrored, to an extent, the wider political split between followers of Trotsky and followers of Stalin. The difference of opinion was also evident in the attitude of Left-wing journals of the time. The *Partisan Review*, which eventually became anti-Stalinist, was far less prescriptive than Mike Gold's *New Masses* and, according to Constance Coiner, 'offered leftist writers a licence not available from Gold and some of the *New Masses* group to learn from modernist formal experiments and to entertain subject matter that was not necessarily "party-line."' <sup>98</sup> Coiner explains that the *Partisan Review* 'accused their "comrades" of being primarily interested in whether or not literature's "political content coincided with the current specifications of the party line"' <sup>99</sup> Modernism, for example, was not party line; it was seen by many on the extreme Left as being a bourgeois excess. Whatever one's political outlook, there is a truth in this thought. Experimentation with form would not have been a particular concern for somebody working long hours and trying to write about experiences in their limited spare time; rather, it was a luxury afforded to those who made a living from writing. Modernism did not do a great deal to support women's rights, either. Janet Wolf notes how 'a glance at the standard histories of modernism is not very encouraging. Like all histories of art, they are stories about men's achievements, in which women barely figure.' <sup>100</sup> More pertinent to the issue of proletarian art and the rejection by left critics of modernism is Wolf's point that 'modernism is always characterized as *masculine* (against the 'feminine' mass culture).' <sup>101</sup> The *Partisan Review* split from the Communist Party in 1937 as truths about Stalin's activities became more widely known. Of the horrific truths about Stalin's tyranny, author Myra Page accepts that she was 'unaware of the other Soviet Union'; she also makes an admission which

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<sup>98</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 32.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Janet Wolf, 'Feminism and Modernism,' in *Feminism: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies, Volume 2: Feminism and modernity*, ed. Mary Evans (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 101.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

suggests that she did have some idea about the atrocities that were taking place: 'Looking back, I see that I didn't want to see it and I was wrong.'<sup>102</sup> In the light of these truths, the strong adherence that the American Communist Party had to the policies and directives that issued from Stalin's Soviet Union throughout the 1920s and 1930s does appear to weaken both its legacy and that of its literary output.

The debate around proletarian art also encompassed the question of what factors made an author proletarian and what constituted a proletarian novel. Walter Rideout explains that 'in 1932, V.F. Calverton, editor of *The Modern Quarterly*... stated that the one necessary distinction between proletarian and bourgeois writers was the adherence of the former to Marxist ideology, no matter what their class origin'.<sup>103</sup> Calverton was not a Communist Party member. Among others, E.A. Schachner, who was a Party member, opposed this view; he instead defined a clear difference between the proletarian novel, which he said 'reflects the life of any typical cross section of the proletariat and need not be more revolutionary than the proletariat itself at the time the novel is written', and the 'revolutionary novel', which he believed 'consciously supports the movement for the revolutionary destruction of Capitalism'.<sup>104</sup> However, Schachner also believed that in the 1930s the prevailing mood among the working class was revolutionary and therefore a proletarian novel written at that time should reflect this fact. Rideout explains that at the 1935 American Writers' Congress, 'Waldo Frank – who was to be unanimously elected chairman of the League of American Writers ... — maintained ... that the ideology of the author alone determines whether a work be proletarian or not'.<sup>105</sup> Later in the conference, this view was supported by Edwin Seaver: 'It is the present class loyalty of the author that is the determining factor, the political orientation of the novelist, and not the class origin, or the class portrayed'.<sup>106</sup> Mike Gold also endorsed this viewpoint, but with the caveat that such a definition gave latitude to the novelist that could lead to 'our literary movement' being made petty-

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<sup>102</sup> Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 121.

<sup>103</sup> Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* [1956] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 166-7.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Edwin Seaver quoted in Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, 168.

bourgeois.<sup>107</sup> Walter Rideout concludes that the definition of a proletarian novel being 'the novel written from a Marxist viewpoint' is the generally accepted one.<sup>108</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'proletarian novel' will be used in this generally accepted sense; when applied to an author, the term 'proletarian' will be used to define a working-class writer.

Rideout also explains the 'very sharp ideological distinction [that] marks off the proletarian fiction of the thirties and the earlier Socialist novels'. The Socialist novels, he says, generally 'rejected violence in favour of parliamentary methods of change' whereas proletarian novels usually held to the view that violence would be necessary because 'capitalism would not abdicate its power peacefully.'<sup>109</sup> This idea adds further complication to the definitions of the novels studied here because those written by Yeziarska, Burke, and Lumpkin tend towards the idea of peaceful methods of bringing about change, whereas Page's writing suggests that violence may be necessary. This added complication provides more reason to make a study of these four authors.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 168-9.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 169-170.

## Chapter Three

### Anzia Yeziarska

#### Yeziarska's Life

Anzia Yeziarska's daughter and only child, Louise Levitas Henriksen, describes her mother's life as 'a typical American failure; she was the artist forced to bloom too soon, at first embarrassed by too many riches and then startlingly deprived.'<sup>1</sup> Henriksen also expresses the opinion that her mother was 'a rebel against every established order, including the tyranny of men,' and that as such 'she quite naturally had been a self-centered feminist even before she'd heard of the marches for women's right to vote.'<sup>2</sup> Anzia Yeziarska is, to some extent, an enigma. Even the year of her birth is not known for certain because, as Mary Dearborn explains, 'her mother had ten children and could not keep track of their birthdates'.<sup>3</sup> It is thought that Yeziarska was born around 1880. Her daughter believes that 'it's hard to find Anzia's real face (or her emotion-charged, explosive personality) in the slick pictures and accounts of her life. The smoothing over and sentimentalizing were mostly her fault.'<sup>4</sup> Dearborn explores the reasons behind the lack of clarity regarding Yeziarska's origins:

Our romantic readings of history have sure groundings in historical realities. This is all the more true when the historical record is largely oral and fragmentary, as it is with the conditions and circumstances that surrounded the massive waves of Eastern European immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An irony of history emerges: The more difficult it is to recover the past, the more romantic readings take over, so that the past slips still further from our grasp.<sup>5</sup>

Yeziarska's public image as a 'Sweatshop Cinderella' was to a large extent self-styled. It is true that she was born into poverty and that her early life in Russian-occupied Poland would have been a very difficult one. The Czar's pogroms, about

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Levitas Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska: A Writer's Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yeziarska and John Dewey* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 34.

which Yeziarska writes, were undoubtedly brutal. Moreover, the life she endured as a young immigrant girl on New York's Lower East Side would also have been hard and tough. However, as her daughter explains, Yeziarska 'had a way of rearranging or inventing the facts' of her life.<sup>6</sup> A few years after Yeziarska died, Henriksen 'began receiving inquiries from scholars.' She expresses her astoundment at what she learned from them:

They surprised me with photocopied documents about Anzia that didn't fit into her life as I knew it. For example, a Columbia University transcript showing that, although she was supposed to have been a primitive who had forfeited her youth in sweatshops and who wrote without knowing how, she had in fact graduated from Columbia's Teaching College in 1904. It should have been obvious that to write as she did in the guise of an untutored immigrant took a certain sophistication.<sup>7</sup>

Henriksen admits that the truth behind the ambiguities of her mother's early life will never be known. Referring to the information that the family had pawned everything that they owned for the price of ship tickets to America, she simply says 'This may be true. They may have lived in a mud hut with an earthen floor. Anzia never corrected those who took her fiction literally, although she frequently changed the details and dates of such events.... There is no family or public record to pin down the facts, not even a birth certificate.'<sup>8</sup>

What is known is that Yeziarska arrived in New York City with her family in about 1890. Her father was a rabbi, and the family was extremely patriarchal in nature. They 'willingly took American names',<sup>9</sup> changing the family name to Mayer; Anzia Yeziarska was reborn in America as Hattie Mayer. Records indicate that she was calling herself Anzia again in 1910, and once published she used her original name Anzia Yeziarska in full.<sup>10</sup> She was determined not to follow her older sisters into what she saw as the trap of marriage, and she left home at around the age of eighteen. A young, unmarried Jewish girl leaving the family and living independently was frowned upon by the Jewish community that Yeziarska sought to break away

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<sup>6</sup> Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



from. She strived to keep the rooms in which she lived simple and uncluttered;<sup>11</sup> characters who share with her this desire for simplicity pervade Yeziarska's work, and perhaps the most notable of these is Sonya, the protagonist of *Salome of the Tenements*. Yeziarska worked where she could find work – sometimes as a servant, other times in the sweatshops– while she attended night school classes to improve her English and her general education.<sup>12</sup> In 1900, Yeziarska 'became a resident – or "inmate," as the girls were revealingly called – of the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls.'<sup>13</sup> It was from here that, in 1901, she was awarded a scholarship to the Domestic Science Department of the Teachers' College. The college was part of Columbia University, but Yeziarska was not supposed to be concerned with anything beyond learning to become a teacher of cooking; 'she was an unwitting "test case" in the new "domestic science" movement, a movement designed to elevate the status of woman but tragically destined to chain her more solidly than ever to the home'.<sup>14</sup> Yeziarska's love was for literature and art, and she never settled into any of her jobs as a teacher of cooking. In 1909 she took a leave of absence from teaching to study for a year at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, hoping to become an actress.<sup>15</sup> She did not, however, pursue a career in acting beyond this year of training.

Yeziarska spent some time living 'in the quarters of the Rand School', which, according to Dearborn, was a 'socialist institution ... that offered classes in the history of trade unionism and the organization of industry as well as more traditional courses in literature and history.'<sup>16</sup> She also formed numerous close attachments to prominent female writers, feminists and radicals. Among the most significant of these friendships was the one with Rose Pastor Stokes, a socialist and feminist who would later join the Communist Party. Stokes was also a member of Heterodoxy, a remarkable club whose members included a number of women considered to be original and radical thinkers.<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn said of Heterodoxy, which

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 70.

'met every other week in Greenwich Village from 1912 until World War II', that "'it has been a glimpse of the women of the future, big-spirited, intellectually alert, devoid of the old 'femininity' which has been replaced by a wonderful free masonry.'"<sup>18</sup> There is no record of Yeziarska being a member of Heterodoxy, and neither is she believed to have ever joined a political party, but her friends and associates were mostly liberal and left-wing, and these were political viewpoints that Yeziarska appears to have shared; her lifestyle would certainly suggest as much.

Anzia Yeziarska married twice in a short period of time, the first time to lawyer Jacob Gordon, and the second to a friend of Gordon's, schoolteacher Arnold Levitas, with whom she had a daughter, Louise. The first marriage ended within six months; it was annulled after Yeziarska explained that she had "'wanted a chum, a friend, a mental companion. Mr. Gordon wanted a mate.'"<sup>19</sup> Her second marriage took place just a few months after the annulment of the first. In what may have been a sign of her growing independence, Yeziarska refused to have a civil ceremony and so had only a religious one, meaning that Arnold Levitas had to adopt his own daughter when she was born in 1912.<sup>20</sup> Anzia spent the next five years moving between New York and California, where her sister Fanny lived. Sometimes she took her daughter with her, and other times Louise stayed with her father in New York. Anzia was attempting to forge a career as an author, and although she often stated how much she loved her daughter, she wrote of how 'a baby is like the ball and chain of the prisoner that keeps him bound to his cell.'<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, in 1917, after a tumultuous relationship that had included numerous attempts at living together, Anzia and Arnold separated permanently, and Louise was given over to the care of Arnold. The same year, Yeziarska began an intense romantic relationship with John Dewey, the rich educator who was married and was around twenty years her senior. Critics recognise John Dewey figures in much of Yeziarska's work; the relationship and its ultimate failure had a profound effect on her. Yeziarska initially worshipped Dewey, and Mary Dearborn believes

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn quoted in Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 70.

<sup>19</sup> Anzia Yeziarska quoted in Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 58.

that he was the man whom Yeziarska ‘felt represented America itself.’<sup>22</sup> The relationship ended badly, and the fact that a figure she had held in such high esteem and seen as almost god-like became in her eyes tainted was a devastating event for Yeziarska.

Yeziarska’s first real literary break came in 1919 when, after a number of smaller magazines had published some of her stories, John Dewey sent her story “Soap and Water and the Immigrant” to Herbert Croly at *New Republic*. Mary Dearborn asserts that it was in 1919 that Yeziarska ‘began her career as a professional immigrant, a writer whose work sounded one theme repeatedly: that of the immigrant misunderstood and betrayed by America.’<sup>23</sup> This is very possibly an oversimplified analysis of Yeziarska’s writing, and such a narrow focus negates other readings of her work, some of which will be attempted in this chapter. Yeziarska quickly became a popular writer, and her first collection of short stories, *Hungry Hearts*, was published in 1920. *Salome of the Tenements*, her first novel, was published in November 1922,<sup>24</sup> and both these books were made into Hollywood films. Yeziarska spent some time in Hollywood during the filming of *Hungry Hearts*. However, she quickly discovered that ‘movie-style luxury was not to her taste’,<sup>25</sup> and she was ‘dismayed to see *Hungry Hearts* given a happy ending and burlesque overtones.’<sup>26</sup> Dearborn suggests that the problem lay in the fact that Yeziarska ‘fundamentally misunderstood Hollywood’s Jewish culture and her place in it.’<sup>27</sup>

Yeziarska enjoyed considerable success during the 1920s, but her star faded rapidly during the Great Depression and by the mid-1930s she was forced to find work on the Federal Writers’ Project. She all but disappeared from the literary scene until she rediscovered some critical acclaim with her 1950 autobiographical novel *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. When she died in 1970, her complicated life ended in relative obscurity; however, her works were already beginning to be revived by academics and she is now once again one of the more prominent female authorial voices of the 1920s.

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<sup>22</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 180.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>26</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 146.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

### Yeziarska's Style

Yeziarska's daughter Louise's description of her mother as having been 'quite naturally ... a self-centered feminist'<sup>28</sup> is a view borne out in Yeziarska's novels and short stories; her writings are likely to leave the reader with an overwhelming sense that the rights and freedoms of the individual should be put ahead of all other concerns, and this sense is further intensified when one studies Yeziarska's own history. There are times when her self-centred and arguably self-pitying nature are powerfully evident: for example, in a letter she wrote to her friend Rose Pastor Stokes she evinces envy of jailed anarchist Warren Billings: 'In one blow he is freed from the dragging down wear and tear of making a living – and in the solitude of the prison, he can think out his thoughts and dream out his dreams as he never could while chained to stomach needs.'<sup>29</sup> Of course it is easy to be critical of such a statement from the luxury of a wealthy country in the twenty-first century when the battle to get enough food to sustain oneself is no longer a daily worry, at least not for the vast majority of people in the developed world. Yeziarska, however, could be said to be highlighting that perhaps being in prison really would be preferable for people who are homeless or on the edge of homelessness.

Her reference to 'stomach needs' highlights the social concerns that feature in her works: Yeziarska's writing of the inter-war years is solely focused upon the lives of poor Jewish immigrants living in Manhattan's Lower East Side Ghetto in New York City. She writes disparagingly of America's wealthy citizens, and in particular of their charity, which she perceives as being offered with both a patronising lack of understanding and an unfeeling, constrictive set of conditions. In all of the interactions between rich and poor that take place in her novels and stories, Yeziarska reminds the reader of the sharp contrast between the two groups in early-twentieth-century America. A question that Adele poses to Arthur Hellman in *Arrogant Beggar* crystallizes this recurring theme: "Can a well-fed person feel what a hungry one feels? It's just that difference between you and me."<sup>30</sup> With regard to the aims of this thesis, Adele's question raises a crucial point. Among the authors

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<sup>28</sup> See note 2.

<sup>29</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 78.

<sup>30</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *Arrogant Beggar* [1927] (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 112.

being studied here, Yeziarska is alone in the poverty of her youth, and when more didactic, middle-class, 'left-wing' authors are critical of workers who do not join the union fight, this powerful and almost rhetorical question should be borne in mind.

Yeziarska's protagonists are acutely aware of their class background but share a desire to gain an improved financial status through their own individual efforts; once such a status is gained, there is a strong suggestion that they will help others achieve a similar rise. This is not to suggest that Yeziarska's characters are willing to keep others down in their quest to rise, but simply that self-reliance is their focus. In fact, Sonya at the end of *Salome of the Tenements* could be said to fit in with Karl Marx's 'socialistic bourgeois',<sup>31</sup> whom he describes as being 'desirous of redressing social grievances ... in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society.'<sup>32</sup> Marx is critical of such 'Conservative, or Bourgeois, Socialism',<sup>33</sup> but Yeziarska takes a more nuanced approach. Marx includes 'improvers of the condition of the working class' and 'organisers of charity'<sup>34</sup> in his attack on Bourgeois Socialism, and in *Salome* Sonya is a vociferous critic of the charity offered to poor working-class girls and young women; however, Sonya is not critical of the notion of help itself but rather the way that help is administered, and by the close of the novel, she has in some respects become part of the bourgeois, albeit one with socialist leanings.

Yeziarska as rebel, certainly in relation to the traditions of her race and faith, is palpable from the very fact that she creates strong, powerful female characters. Jeraldine Kraver expands on this point:

In Yeziarska's fiction, it is the daughters who seek to challenge the authority of the father. The complexity of this relationship originates in the significantly different roles assigned to men and women in traditional Jewish culture. The position is perhaps best reflected in the words of the morning prayer for men and boys: "Blessed art Thou, O God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman." Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel ... explain that "it was a rare Jewish sage in fact who did not view women as frivolous, ignorant beings, performing vital tasks in the home and endowed with simple

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<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1872] (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 252.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

spirituality, but otherwise regarded as diverting their husbands from their obligation to study sacred texts".<sup>35</sup>

Kraver then points to the lesson that Sara Smolinsky learns from her father in *The Bread Givers*: 'The prayers of his daughter didn't count because God didn't listen to women. Heaven and the next world were only for men. Women could get into Heaven because they were wives and daughters of men.'<sup>36</sup> Analysis of Yeziarska's female characters suggests that she defies what would appear to have been the inherent sexism of her culture and religion: her female characters are strong-willed, independent, and they reject to varying degrees the ties of their religious upbringings.

Despite her criticism of those with wealth and her vivid portrayal of ghetto life's harshness, the pervading theme throughout Yeziarska's work remains that of the individual's ability to rise and achieve in the world, both educationally and financially. In this respect, Anzia Yeziarska's works are distinctly American, despite the majority of critics reading her as an author of what is sometimes termed immigrant narratives. Yet having made this point, it has to be remembered that America is a nation of immigrants, which makes distinctions between 'American' and 'immigrant' problematic and potentially nonsensical in the first place. The search for a distinctive 'American' literary voice is almost as old as the United States itself: Walt Whitman worked to create one and many great writers of various backgrounds have added their contribution. With America being a country of such a diverse populace, its literary voice ought to be inclusive and look beyond the boundaries that people so often demark themselves with. Langston Hughes famously writes 'I, too, am America'; Anzia Yeziarska, too, certainly is America.

### **Yeziarska's Conclusions: An 'American' Author**

#### ***Bread Givers, Arrogant Beqqar, and Salome of the Tenements***

Having stated that labels such as American and immigrant are problematic, labelling Yeziarska's writing as having a clear American tone and voice may appear strange, particularly when it is considered how much time her immigrant heroines

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<sup>35</sup> Jeraldine R. Kraver, "'The Old Burden Dragged Me Back by the Hair:' Unsatisfying Endings in the Autobiographical Fiction of Anzia Yeziarska," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* v. 16 (1997): 26.

<sup>36</sup> Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, 9.

spend agonizing over their desire to be accepted as Americans by mainstream society; this desire is a strong echo of Yeziarska's life, in which, according to Mary Dearborn, she 'wished fervently to make herself over as an American.'<sup>37</sup> However, this is an important point. Yeziarska addresses what was a serious issue for people: being an immigrant, or at least a relatively-newly-arrived immigrant, created problems for those who fell into that category. This is nonsensical in theory because the human story is one of continual movement and migration, and current thinking indicates that every human living in America arrived from somewhere else; yet in practice people have always made the distinction between those who are 'from' a place and those who are immigrants to that place.

Taking the term 'immigrant' to mean a person who has arrived at a place in relatively recent times, the immigrant voice certainly is very audible throughout Yeziarska's writing: the opening page of *Salome of the Tenements* finds Sonya telling John Manning "'Your words—they'll burn into the hearts of the people like the fire of new religion. Never before did a born American talk out to them so prophetically—what means it America!'"<sup>38</sup> Yet as has already been stated, the very notion of drawing a distinction between the terms 'immigrant' and 'American' is problematic because the United States of America is a country built on immigration from a large number of countries and cultures; it is also, therefore, a country in search of an identity, a fact particularly true in the early twentieth century as it rose to the status of a world superpower while experiencing mass waves of immigration and dealing with severe race and gender inequalities. And this is the point: Yeziarska is very much an American author, writing semi-autobiographical protagonists, independent thinkers and strong-willed women of action who live courageously and act bravely upon their instincts. Moreover, their focus is essentially on themselves. This is not to say that they are uncaring or unsympathetic, but simply that they act in a way that prioritises their own needs above all else. They are, in essence, rebels, and on account of their attitudes and lifestyle they are, at least at the beginning of their narratives, forced to live on the

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<sup>37</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* [1923] (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 1. Subsequent references in parenthesis are to this edition.

edge of society, no longer quite fitting in with the old immigrant world that they seek to escape, but never being truly accepted as Americans either. It is important to note that this sense of not quite belonging is heightened by the fact that Yeziarska's characters themselves do not ultimately know into which section of society they would like to be accepted. Therefore, partly on account of their own personalities and partly due the prevailing mood of society at the time, Yeziarska's heroines are somewhat lonely and isolated figures.

Parallels are drawn by Mary Dearborn between some of the women that Yeziarska mixed with and the true 'new woman', 'the feminist pioneers of the first decade of the [twentieth] century, the passionate idealists who sought to change traditional notions of woman's place, of love and marriage, of the organization of the home.'<sup>39</sup> Carol Smith-Rosenberg explains that 'we identify the New Woman most directly with the new women's colleges. In her own mind and the minds of her contemporaries, education constituted the New Woman's most salient characteristic – and her first self-conscious demand.'<sup>40</sup> In this respect, Yeziarska was not a New Woman, for she was a poor immigrant; on the other hand, she became educated and even taught at colleges, and she also gained financial independence; in doing so, she challenged assumptions about what constituted a New Woman, something her character Sonya also does in *Salome of the Tenements*. Smith-Rosenberg also claims that 'the educated bourgeois women who came to political and creative maturity in the 1910s and the 1920s had grown up in a uniquely androgynous world. They *assumed* their right to exist outside of gender, in the public arena.'<sup>41</sup> Yeziarska could be classed this way to a certain extent, though her characters could certainly not: if nothing else, they are far from being educated bourgeois women, although education is something for which some of them strive and achieve; nor, for that matter, was Yeziarska educated and bourgeois, at least not while she was growing up. And although Yeziarska appears never to have become active in any movement for social change, she did interact with and became

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<sup>39</sup> Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 70.

<sup>40</sup> Carol Smith-Rosenberg, 'The New Woman as Androgyne: Social disorder and gender crisis, 1870–1936,' in *Feminism: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies, Volume 2: Feminism and modernity*, ed. Mary Evans (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 158.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.



close to a number of people, particularly women, who were involved in such groups and movements. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, perhaps most notable among these people was Rose Pastor Stokes, whose marriage to the non-Jewish millionaire philanthropist James Graham Phelps Stokes, a man of Anglo-Saxon heritage, was part of the inspiration for Yeziarska's 1922 novel *Salome of the Tenements*.

It is Dearborn's use of the word 'pioneers' to describe the New Woman that further reinforces the notion of Yeziarska's life and writing being placed firmly in the American tradition, for the word calls to mind the American story, which is, after all, a story of immigration, of pioneering individuals on the frontier gazing, in the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, upon the 'fresh, green breast of the new world.'<sup>42</sup> And if Yeziarska's characters are rebellious individualists who do not quite fit in to any part of society because of their desire to forge ahead and leave the old world, old ways and the old class behind, they are certainly characters in keeping with some very famous American literary creations: James Fenimore Cooper's frontiersman Hawkeye, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, and perhaps even fellow 1920s creation Jay Gatsby. Yeziarska's protagonists could be said to be of-their-time equivalents to the American frontier people who forged a new life and a new world for themselves.

There is another feature of Yeziarska's writing that places it as 'American': the inherent belief found at the conclusion of her novels that a person must stand up for themselves independently and not rely on help from others. Although by no means unique to the United States, this perspective fits in with the liberal viewpoint which dominated nineteenth-century America and only really began to change, if it ever has changed much, with the New Deal of the 1930s. But Yeziarska's novels have conclusions that also belie the more rebellious nature of her heroines. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is found in the conclusion of *Bread Givers* (1925). The protagonist Sara Smolinsky feels the tyranny of her father throughout her life; this tyranny is mostly religious in its nature and she describes it as 'the tyranny with which he tried to crush me as a child'.<sup>43</sup> Yet as an independent, educated adult she still reaches out to him and takes him into her own home to live with her; she even

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<sup>42</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* [1926] (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 171.

<sup>43</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers* [1925] (New York: Persea Books, 1999), 295-6.

accepts his strict demand that she promise ‘to keep sacred all that is sacred to’ him.<sup>44</sup> She accepts that ‘the shadow of the burden’ of her religion, her past, her father, ‘was always following’ her.<sup>45</sup> In the final lines of the novel, Sara and Hugo linger to hear ‘the mere music of the fading chant’ that her father is vocalizing, and the novel concludes with the statement that ‘it wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me.’<sup>46</sup> Jeraldine R. Kraver explains that ‘Yeziarska, like her heroines, chose to embrace the opportunity and independence offered by America’ but that ‘too quickly, she and they discovered that the cost of their choice was a dear one.’<sup>47</sup>

Kraver also notes that ‘before considering Yeziarska’s fiction, it is important to understand that during the early decades of the twentieth century the renunciation of traditional culture was often key to the successful integration into American life’, and that ‘rejecting the ethnic identities of their parents often placed second generation children in an awkward position, one in which they were troubled by unrealized hopes, anxiety, and self-hatred.’<sup>48</sup> Little mention is made of Sonya’s parents in *Salome of the Tenements*. Sonya refers to herself as an orphan when appealing to her landlord to refurbish her apartment. It is difficult to know whether or not she should be believed, given that in her character there are strong echoes of Yeziarska and that the truth of Yeziarska’s life is shrouded in mystery. However, if Sonya is indeed an orphan, she is in a way able to operate outside of the pressures that are felt by Sara in *Bread Givers*.

Sonya is, though, proudly a member of her race: ‘I am a Russian Jewess, a flame – a longing’, she tells John Manning in one of their meetings before they are married (37). This is one of her contradictions, for she also seeks to be more American, a desire which draws her towards Manning. But although she ultimately returns to live among those of her own race after the failure of her marriage to the Anglo-Saxon Manning, the fact that there is no apparent patriarchal, old-world influence operating on Sonya is important when considering her character. The

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>47</sup> Kraver, “The Old Burden”, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

reader discovers only that her father was 'a dreamy-eyed religious fanatic' while her mother is described as having been 'overworked' and 'care-crushed' (83). The fact that Sonya, like Yeziarska and her other protagonists, leaves her family is an event confined to just one sentence: 'She had left family and friends behind her in her driving need to possess the chimera just beyond' (84). Sonya was born in Europe, as was Yeziarska, but Sonya makes little mention of the fact. She refers to it during her meeting with Manning in the Russian café, highlighting how her desire to be 'free like the seagulls' was stifled even as a little girl on the ship to America in which she was 'roped off, herded, like cattle, in the steerage' (34).

Yeziarska is often labelled as an author whose fiction is semi-autobiographical, but although it is true that certain parallels exist between her life and her fiction, direct connections between the two prove somewhat elusive. Sonya is powerful and dominant at the novel's conclusion, unlike Sara in *Bread Givers* and, according to Alice Kessler-Harris, unlike Yeziarska herself: 'Yeziarska ended her life convinced that her obsession to lift herself out of material poverty had resulted in poverty of the soul'.<sup>49</sup> It is, therefore, too simplistic to look only for similarities between Yeziarska and her heroines. Sonya appears to avoid the unwelcome emotional fate that, according to Kraver, Freud believed immigrant daughters seeking escape from the past would suffer: 'The quest of immigrant daughters to find places for themselves in a new world civilization initiates a process that, Freud suggests, can only end in a sense of isolation, ambivalence, and guilt.'<sup>50</sup> However, having said that one should not seek too many similarities between Yeziarska and her characters, the air of mystery that surrounds the life history of Anzia Yeziarska is distinctly present in the life history of Sonya. The aforementioned story of her experience in steerage on the ship to America is contradicted later in the novel when the reader is told that Sonya was 'born in the blackest poverty of a Delancey Street basement' (83). With echoes of her creator, Sonya certainly is an enigma.

The conclusion of *Arrogant Beggar* (1927) is somewhat different from that of *Bread Givers*; however, like the earlier novel, it too presents a previously lost and uncertain protagonist who has finally found a place in the world. In the case of

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<sup>49</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris quoted in Kraver, "The Old Burden", 24.

<sup>50</sup> Kraver, "The Old Burden", 24.

*Arrogant Beggar*, that place is as the proprietor of a small café. Adele has, in effect, become part of the great American tradition: she is a self-employed capitalist, at least of sorts – whether being the owner of a very small business makes one a capitalist is certainly open to debate. Yet the conclusion of *Arrogant Beggar* contrasts with the conclusion of *Bread Givers*, in which Sara re-engages with the old world. Adele is embracing the new world, standing on her own and making a place for herself. And she is a very benign capitalist (or small business owner) who employs the use of an honesty box rather than charging a set price for her food and drink. Nevertheless, she is now the owner of a business, and in the process of reaching this position, she accepts certain facts about the world of the rich and middle-classes that she had previously so derided. While she is refurbishing Muhmenkeh's old room, she reaches a salient conclusion:

In spite of myself, it was the course of cooking and cleaning in the Training School that was the making of me. The knowledge of how to dye and paint and furnish a room – the meaning of order and cleanliness that I used to knock my head against the wall trying to learn – it was that everlasting fussiness over what I had thought nothing at all that enabled me to transform the dilapidated, three steps down from the sidewalk basement into "Muhmenkeh's Coffee Shop."<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Adele learns to enjoy one of capitalism's major mechanisms: the market. And in this enjoyment she is presented as having accepted one of capitalism's key tenets. Close to the novel's end, she confesses:

Once I had hated the sordid sight of women fighting at the pushcarts to get the food a penny cheaper for their families. Now bargaining became a game with a new meaning for me. Giving my people the most for the least money was my way of working out the hungers I had suffered.<sup>52</sup>

The context may be very different but the market is still the market and Adele is now enjoying the thrill of playing it. This is also an example of how Yeziarska's characters develop and rise in terms of their social and economic status from initial positions of occupying the fringes of society. A further suggestion of Yeziarska's belief in independence and of reliance upon oneself is found, again close to the novel's conclusion, when Adele and Rachmansky are discussing how they rejected the world of the Hellmans to make their own way in life. Rachmansky says:

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<sup>51</sup> Yeziarska, *Arrogant Beggar*, 126.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

“They gave us what they thought we ought to have. But we wanted something that no individual could give. Something that we ourselves must wrest from life. The amazing thing to me is that we expected so much from them and were hurt because it wasn’t humanly possible for them to live up to our expectations.”<sup>53</sup>

Adele responds by pointing out that “the very inferiority which their kindness burned into me drove me to get on my own feet in the quickest possible way.”<sup>54</sup> Adele and Rachmansky both forgive the Hellmans, and in fact start to feel a sense of guilt over the way they have treated them. Adele even says, “We’ve both been wicked, cruel to the Hellmans.”<sup>55</sup> This statement seems incredible when considered against Adele’s earlier statements about the Hellman Home for Working Girls – that it should be burned down – and her accusation that Mrs Hellman is a hypocrite and “a hired stepmother”.<sup>56</sup> There is a clear echo here of Sara’s decision to forgive her father for his cruelty in *Bread Givers*, further emphasizing the theme of forgiveness with which Yeziarska’s writing often concludes.

### **Salome of the Tenements**

#### **The Conclusion of *Salome of the Tenements***

This theme of forgiveness is also found at the denouement of *Salome of the Tenements*. The forgiveness on this occasion comes from the now powerful but perhaps emotionally lonely heroine, Sonya. Natalie Friedman states that the novel ‘ends with a surprising scene of attempted rape.’<sup>57</sup> She explains how ‘Sonya Vrunsky, the Russian Jewish protagonist, is assaulted in her apartment one night by her ex-husband, the Protestant philanthropist John Manning. She thwarts his attack and, in a disturbing concluding scene, forgives her would-be rapist, recognizing that she loves him’.<sup>58</sup> Friedman believes that the novel’s ending ‘seems to romanticize rape and rob its heroine of her independence; yet, the novel is a celebration of a wily, tough woman character.’<sup>59</sup> It is unclear whether Yeziarska actually intended

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>57</sup> Natalie Friedman, “Marriage and the Immigrant Narrative: Anzia Yeziarska’s *Salome of the Tenements*,” *Legacy* v. 22, no. 2 (2005): 183.

<sup>58</sup> Friedman, “Marriage and the Immigrant Narrative”, 183.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

the scene to be read as an attempted rape, although it certainly works to expose a facet of Manning's personality that was hitherto suppressed and hidden. The reader is told that 'with an inarticulate cry he [Manning] seized her in his arms, savage passion in his eyes' (181), and Sonya's clothes are torn in the frenzy. These facts make an interpretation of attempted rape far less ambiguous than the interpretation of the possible rape of Tess by Alec D'Urberville in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: in the Hardy novel, sexual intercourse unquestionably takes place, but there is uncertainty as to whether it is consensual. Yet in the final scene of *Salome*, it is not possible to say with absolute certainty that Manning is actually planning to rape Sonya. Douglas J. Goldstein does not interpret any such menace in the scene. Instead, he suggests that Sonya has finally inspired Manning 'with Jewish passion', and that although it is an 'incomplete victory', Manning's 'declaration of passion does not spell his doom ... but rather makes clear that he is beginning a new life.'<sup>60</sup>

Whichever way the scene is interpreted, Manning does release Sonya from his arms the instant that she pushes him away and cries for him to stop. Furthermore, the incident concludes with Sonya as the unequivocal victor: 'Dazed, struck into sudden awakening by her repulse, his burning gaze covered her from head to foot. Hair dishevelled, waist torn away, revealing the heaving bosom, the white throbbing neck, she stood there, superb, ravishing in her fury.... Her scorn stripped him naked, exposing him to himself' (181). A few lines later, Yeziarska states of Sonya that 'this was her moment. She had it in her to bring this wreck back to life' (182). Friedman refers to the fact that Sonya chooses not to push home her advantage and instead forgives Manning as being 'disturbing'. In fact, Sonya goes further than just forgiving Manning: her response to his apology is to apologise to him in return.

The transfer of power from the American Anglo-Saxon Manning to the Russian Jew Sonya is symbolized when Sonya sees 'not the arrogant Anglo-Saxon ... stood before her', but a 'human being – suffering – wounded – despised and rejected in his hour of need' (182). Furthermore, she also sees that 'she was the

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<sup>60</sup> Douglas J. Goldstein, "The Political Dimensions of Desire in Anzia Yeziarska's 'The Lost Beautifulnes' and *Salome of the Tenements*," *Studies in American Fiction*, v. 35, no. 1 (2007): 60.

cross on which he bled. She was the mad passion that had roused in him this fiery famine for love. And now she denied him' (182). Manning is represented here as a symbolic Jesus figure, and as Jesus was a Jew, this adds to the sense of transformation; Sonya as the cross could be said to represent the Pharisees, powerful religious leaders on whose request Jesus was crucified. The prophecy of the opening chapter is fulfilled: Sonya is now symbolized as not only the voice of her people but as their power, too. And it was Manning, speaking 'prophetically' (2), who had told her she could become this voice. Sonya's 'saint', the Manning with the 'saintly head' and 'the look of radiant comprehension' (44), who at first had about him a 'touch of divinity' (3), is exposed as being mere man. The transformation between the two of them is complete: at the novel's beginning, Manning refers to Sonya as 'My child' (3). By the end, Sonya recognises the wounded Manning as 'a child that needed comforting. And she was a woman' (182).

Friedman's reading fails to recognize any of these elements, or that at the novel's conclusion Sonya comes to an understanding about her relationship with Manning that suggests that she had once almost wanted him to demonstrate the passion he reveals in the final scene: "'The way he loved me at the last was what I dreamed of him at first sight'" (184). She also reaches a philosophical conclusion about the nature of humankind: "'We kill the divine in us. We kill the beauty in those we love. But the very killing makes immortal the contact'" (183). Sonya's musings, and the religious symbolism that Yeziarska employs, go a long way to explaining why Sonya forgives Manning for his abhorrent behaviour. Moreover, this theme of the protagonist forgiving others and achieving a form of reconciliation with themselves is, as has been seen, common in Yeziarska's novels. It could be viewed as a conclusion to the emotional journey on which the central characters have been, even though each of the novel's endings actually marks a new beginning of some sort for the protagonists.

There is a comparison to be made here between the conclusion of *Salome* and that of the other texts that will be discussed in this thesis, for although Friedman's reading of *Salome's* conclusion lacks depth, she is correct to assert that it is a problematic ending. Of course all conclusions are arguably problematic because life has no conclusion except death. Putting this thought aside, however, the

conclusion of *Salome* is problematic for a very positive reason: it is difficult to accept Sonya's thoughts in relation to the position in which she finds herself. She is now a woman with money and means; she has, in this sense, joined the middle class. She and Hollins plan to open a not-for-profit fashion shop in the ghetto to provide "beauty for those that love it" (178); for Sonya this is a luxury that can only be afforded because of Hollins' wealth, which he has gained by designing clothes exclusively for the rich. Sonya considers that the "shop of the beautiful" is 'to be my settlement!' (178). A woman born with natural beauty is planning to spread some of that beauty through her ability to create simple, elegant and affordable clothing, but she will do so from a position of relative wealth, and the products she will provide will not help to house people or feed them. Her thoughts about Manning are for some critics hard to justify, yet they are ultimately very human emotions. She asks herself whom it is that she really loves, Manning or Hollins, and she considers that she might love both or neither. She reaches an understanding about human nature, a 'truth' that 'for a long time she lay crushed under the weight of' (183) before she sees beyond it. The conclusion of *Salome* is, therefore, difficult. It is filled with contradiction and apparent hypocrisy. But these complications are crucial because they mirror the complications faced by large sections of humanity, and it is this that both makes *Salome* such an interesting novel and creates the contrast between it and most of the other novels to be studied in this dissertation. Speaking somewhat generally, and with the exception of *Call Home the Heart*, those other novels will be seen to have more simplistic conclusions that leave an impression of being didactic in nature.

#### The Presentation of the Poor in *Salome of the Tenements*

Anzia Yezierska's novels focus on the lives of the urban poor, and more specifically on eastern-European Jewish immigrants living in Manhattan's Lower East Side ghettos. While her main characters are filled with complexities and contradictions, critics who have accused her of writing characters that lack depth do to some extent have a valid point. When viewed through the lens of her secondary characters, Yezierska's portrayal of the poor does sometimes stray into what would appear to be stereotyping, although Yezierska grew up in the ghetto and would,



therefore, know more about its denizens than the majority of people who did not live in that world. Whether or not these stereotypes are based on Yeziarska's experiences of people, which if they are would suggest a reliance by Yeziarska on social 'types', a number of her less prominent characters do leave the reader with a rather negative impression. In *Salome*, they appear to be either weak, like Gittel and Lipkin; nasty, greedy and self-interested, like Sonya's landlord, Abe the moneylender, Ziskind, and the woman in the clothing shop who first tells Sonya about Hollins; or gaudy and slightly vulgar though perhaps well-meaning at heart, like Mrs. Peltz. Selfless beings in the mould of Muhmenkeh in *Arrogant Beggar* seem few and far between. However, despite her hyperbolic style, Yeziarska does write from experience; this is a fact that some critics would seem to have dismissed before criticizing her characterization. Having said this, writing from experience is not necessarily an adequate defence for writing characters who are arguably stereotypes, and serious literature should probably try to avoid such characterisation. Yet there is not usually space in a novel to include a detailed exploration of every minor character, which, when considered with her personal experience of people in the ghetto, perhaps justifies Yeziarska's characterisation to at least a certain extent.

One image of the poor that recurs throughout Yeziarska's writing is of mothers breastfeeding in public. Middle- and upper-class women often still used wet nurses in the early part of the twentieth century despite the bourgeois ideal being to feed one's own child. The public displays of breastfeeding that Yeziarska describes serve to highlight not only the poverty of those mothers but also their status as working-class women; women from wealthier backgrounds would have breastfed in private if they did so at all.<sup>61</sup> However, in *Salome* Yeziarska, for a brief, almost dreamlike moment turns the image of the downtrodden working-class woman breastfeeding dirty babies into something altogether more beautiful and perhaps even sensual. 'The slattern *yentehs* lounging on the stoops, their dirty babies at their breasts, were transfigured into Madonnas of love' (183). Along with

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<sup>61</sup> Claude S. Fischer, "Breastfeeding History," *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, <http://madeinamericathebook.wordpress.com/2011/09/21/breastfeeding-history/> (accessed 21 January 2013).

Yeziarska's other referrals to breastfeeding mothers, this line evokes the idea of the male gaze described in the second chapter of this thesis. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson avers that the maternal breast has 'been on view from prehistory through the beginning of the modern era' in art and sculpture but has been replaced in our contemporary era by the erotic breast.<sup>62</sup> Although there is ambiguity in Garland-Thomson's use of the term 'Modern Era', she is most probably making reference to the post-Second-World-War period. The natural and prosaic manner in which Yeziarska usually describes breastfeeding, a most natural event, is something that resists the male gaze and the more modern view of the female breast as described by Garland-Thomson; yet at the same time the transformation of Yeziarska's yentehs in 'Madonnas of love' briefly almost belies this resistance to the traditional idea of the male gaze. This point is an example of the great complexity that exists in Yeziarska's apparently straightforward writing.

Catherine Rottenberg paraphrases Jennifer Hochschild in defining the American Dream as 'the promise held out to each and every American that he or she has a reasonable chance of achieving success through his or her own efforts.'<sup>63</sup> Rottenberg also quotes Yeziarska on the subject: 'In America every one tries to better himself, acquire more than he started with, become more important.'<sup>64</sup>

Exploring the importance of the class theme in *Salome*, Rottenberg explains that

success, as ... Sonya Vrunsky defines it, means leaving poverty – “the prison of ... soul-wasting want” – behind; Sonya is described as wanting more than anything else to move away from the “blackness of poverty” and to reach the “mountain-tops of life”. The image of upwardness, whereby poverty is presented as low and wealth as high, is a central trope in the novel. In this way, Yeziarska portrays the United States not only as a society with clear class stratifications, but also a society in which individuals are capable of changing their location in the hierarchical formation, that is, they can rise above want and need, and enjoy the “higher life,” where the “luxuries of love, beauty, plenty” abound.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 142.

<sup>63</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, "Salome of the Tenements, the American Dream and Class Performativity," *American Studies* v. 45, no. 1 (2004): 65.

<sup>64</sup> Yeziarska quoted in Rottenberg, "American Dream", 65.

<sup>65</sup> Rottenberg, "American Dream", 65-6.

Such words are reminiscent of the view that Chinese immigrants had of California in the mid-nineteenth-century gold rush: they called it ‘*gam saan* or “gold mountain”’.<sup>66</sup>

Rottenberg highlights how ‘Yeziarska’s flamboyant and sometimes hyperbolic narrative style alongside her constant invocation of class norms make ... [*Salome*] a particularly suitable site for investigating ... class status’.<sup>67</sup> She explains that ‘the American Dream is informed by a very specific notion of the social subject as an individual’,<sup>68</sup> and explores this idea further:

By the mid-eighteenth century ... the notion of individual rights ... comprised an article of faith. The idea that individuals are proprietors of their own person ... for which they owe little or nothing to society, alongside the conviction that an individual’s freedom should only be limited by the requirements of the freedom of other individuals rapidly became cornerstones of American liberal democracy.<sup>69</sup>

Rottenberg then points to ‘an interesting tension within American class discourse’ created by ‘the conviction that one can ascend the class ladder’:

On the one hand, the American Dream seems to suggest that the United States is not a class society of the traditional European type (because anyone can potentially move up the ladder), while on the other hand, the discourse assumes the existence of some kind of class formation, for otherwise the very notion of moving up the hierarchy would be nonsensical.<sup>70</sup>

Karl Marx, she explains, argued that classes existed in the United States but that they had not yet become fixed; ‘rather they “continually change and interchange their elements in a continual state of flux”’.<sup>71</sup> She focuses on this ‘conception of class status as transformable’<sup>72</sup> and expounds on the point thus:

Since in America gender and race have historically been conceived of as essences, as biological facts that cannot be altered, the norms concatenated to these categories of identification have been construed as natural attributes. According to hegemonic conceptions of gender, women *are* feminine – they *are* nurturing and emotional.... However, in the U.S., hard work, willpower, and moral uprightness are not so much attributes that are naturally concatenated

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<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/chinese2.html> (accessed 30 June 2015).

<sup>67</sup> Rottenberg, “American Dream”, 66.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

to (social) groups but rather characteristics that can be acquired by particular and individual subjects. Michael Sandel highlights this point through his distinction between attributes that one *has* and attributes that one *is*.<sup>73</sup>

Yeziarska's protagonists challenge the idea of essences while also emphasizing this 'tension within American class discourse': they believe in being whatever they can be or want to be, yet they are constantly challenged by a sense of what they are; they also believe in climbing the allegorical ladder to achieve an improved social and economic position in the world, yet they question the very system that creates such a ladder.

### **Presentations of Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements***

#### **Sonya, the Working-Class Riser**

Sonya's story in *Salome* both proves and disproves the theory discussed by Rottenberg that in America an individual can change his or her class: she proves it because she achieves an upward change in her material status; she disproves it because she finds that traits which she herself associates with her ethnic group, in particular her emotional and flamboyant nature, are viewed by the upper-middle-class world into which she marries as negative qualities. Sonya feels that she cannot change herself to suit the austere and emotionally restrained manner of the Anglo-Saxon "American-born higher ups – all class and coldness" (30) into whose world she has moved, and so she leaves the philanthropist John Manning and returns to live and work among her own people. Rottenberg explains the manner in which society does in fact control movement between social classes when she asserts the following:

If a regime privileges particular attributes, then it must also encourage subjects to desire and strive to embody them. It can and does attempt to bar certain subjects from accessing privilege and positions of power through classification – or compelling race identification – but it cannot completely control the effects of its own discourse. So long as the attributes associated with the lower classes are coded as undesirable in class societies, only those class subjects who strive to embody attributes associated with the middle class gain admittance to some of the benefits of privilege and power.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 74.

Sonya's refusal to change her manner means that she does not embody the attributes associated with the middle class. She is, therefore, denied acceptance by the members of that class. At the close of the novel, Sonya has achieved financial success through her dress design and her union with Hollins. She remains, however, of a background and temperament that will almost certainly continue to preclude her from entry into the upper-middle-class establishment world of American society. But the novel concludes with the sense that this fact will no longer worry or concern Sonya because she appears to be contented with the socio-economic place she holds in the world, demonstrated by the strength of her convictions in the final chapter, and her tearful happiness at her 'shop of the beautiful' which will be her 'settlement' (178).

*Salome of the Tenements* can be read in a number of different ways; essentially, however, it can be viewed as a novel about one woman's rise out of poverty and into a life of financial security. What Yeziarska presents to the reader is a vision of a woman's fierce drive to escape from the poverty of the ghetto and to achieve not just financial independence but financial success. And using the burning passion with which she is endowed, Sonya, that woman, reaches her goal. She is described as being a 'blazing comet from out of a clear sky' (22) whose 'imperious craving for what she wanted dominated not only her family, but the tenement house, the whole block where she lived' even when she was still a child (83), and it is this strong-willed temperament that helps her find success.

Having described Sonya as strong-willed, consideration should be given to the notion of will, and in particular the freedom of will, or free will. This idea is best juxtaposed with Determinism, something that Chapman Cohen does when he responds to the question, "What is the essential issue between the believers in Free-Will and the upholders of the doctrine of Determinism?"<sup>75</sup> He lays out the two positions as follows, explaining first Determinism:

One may put the Deterministic position in a few words. It is essentially a thorough-going application of the principle of causation to human nature.... When the Determinist refers to the "Order of Nature" he includes all, and asserts that an accurate analysis of human nature will be found to exemplify

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<sup>75</sup> Chapman Cohen, *Determinism or Free-Will* (London and Felling-on-Tyne: The Walter Scott Publishing Company, Ltd., 1912): 9.

the same principle of causation that is seen to obtain elsewhere. True, mental phenomena have laws of their own ... but these are additional, not contradictory to other natural laws. Any exception to this is apparent, not real.... [The manifestations of] man's nature ... are dependent upon processes with which no one dreams of associating the conception of "freedom." .... The Determinist claims ... that his view of human nature is thoroughly scientific ... and ... that unless this view of human nature be accepted the scientific cultivation of character becomes an impossibility.<sup>76</sup>

Cohen then explains the position of the Volitionist:

The believer in Free-Will – it will be briefer and more convenient to use the term "Volitionist" or "Indeterminist" for the future – does not on his part deny the influence on the human organism of those forces on which the Determinist lays stress. What he denies is that any of them singly, or all of them collectively, can ever furnish an adequate and exhaustive account of human action. He affirms that after analysis has done its utmost there remains an unexplained residuum beyond the reach of the instruments or the methods of positive science.... It is admitted that circumstances may influence conduct, but only in the way that a cheque for five pounds enables one to become possessed of a certain quantity of bullion – provided the cheque is honoured by the bank. So the "Will" may honour or respond to certain circumstances or it may not. In other words, the deterministic influence of circumstances is contingent, not necessary. They operate only when a "free" volition assents to their operation.<sup>77</sup>

Sonya represents free will, rising above her circumstances and reacting to 'the nature and inclination of ... the forces bearing upon human nature' in a markedly different way to those around her upon whom the same forces of nature have been exerted. She displays evidence of that 'unexplained residuum beyond the reach of the instruments ... of ... science'. Given that even now in the twenty-first century the human brain is not fully understood by science, the Determinism versus Free Will debate, much like that of Nature versus Nurture, remains far from being settled conclusively. However, analysis of Yeziarska's protagonists and characters would suggest that although she does consider the Determinist argument, particularly through characters like Sara's mother in *Bread Givers* and Honest Abe in *Salome*, she ultimately appears to have supported the notion of free will over that of determinism.

Evidence for Sonya from *Salome* as a believer in free will abounds. Her wilful nature drives her through all adversity as she forces her way to where she

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<sup>76</sup> Cohen, *Determinism or Free-Will?*, 9-10.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

wants to be. In a sense, she is the unstoppable force about which naturalist authors wrote. Naturalism is an artistic form which Richard Gray describes thus: '[Naturalist authors] subscribed to a darker, supposedly more scientific form of realism ... that denies human agency; in these fictions, environmental forces control events and the individual is acted upon rather than active, subjected to the determinations of life – the elemental forces running through nature, society and every single human being.'<sup>78</sup> Sonya, the aforementioned 'blazing comet from out of a clear sky' (22), is represented as being the elemental force itself.

The sense of a desire for upward mobility is apparent throughout the novel. Near the beginning, Sonya agrees that the "struggle for bread makes [people] coarse-grained and greedy" when she says "It's just to get away from the sordidness of this penny-pinched existence that I got to catch on to a man like Manning" (6-7). Her colleague and friend Gittel then accuses Sonya of being "only a creature consumed by the madness to rise", to which Sonya responds that "a woman should be youth and fire and madness – the desire that reaches for the stars" (7). Although Sonya focuses primarily on her own circumstances, she has a dream of raising the whole ghetto out of poverty once she herself is rich. In her dream she pictures 'envious fingers pointing her out' as 'Mrs. John Manning, who gives away millions to the poor!' and she hopes for the day when 'through her luck the whole ghetto is saved' (13). At this early stage, before her disillusionment, Sonya still believes that the best way for her to make her money is through an attachment to a rich man. Others cynically mock Sonya's dream of rising, in particular the shop owner who tells Sonya about Jacques Hollins; yet despite being told that "only the four hundred are rich enough to pass through his door" (a reference to the four hundred richest families of New York), Sonya disregards the 'mocking laughter' of the woman and makes her way to Fifth Avenue (15-6). Later in the novel, after the disastrous wedding reception heralds Sonya's realisation of what her marriage to Manning actually means for her, she shakes 'her fist at the mansion and its guests and states "Life is to them that have life. Love is to them that have love. Life and love shall be mine even if all the New York millionaires got to pay for it" (47).

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 300.

Sonya's will is extremely strong and survives all the challenges that it has to face. Even after she leaves Manning and returns temporarily to a state of poverty, Sonya continues to strive, and her talent for dress design is soon seized upon by a garment shop owner, Ziskind, who sees her talent as a means of making money for himself. Sonya in turn uses him as her way in to the fashion industry; once she meets Hollins again, her journey towards financial success is complete. The "end to darkness and dirt", the release "from the blackness of ... poverty" that Sonya once believed would be provided to her by Manning, her "deliverer" (5), are in fact found through her own talents and her union with Hollins.

Sonya finds her success in the fashion industry, an industry that can perhaps be perceived as one that reinforces a societal view that women should be concerned with being physically alluring rather than making their way in the world in the manner that men traditionally have. However, Lori Harrison-Kahan uses historical evidence to demonstrate that Sonya's choice of industry in no way detracts from her strength as a character who could be admired and emulated by women of the time aspiring to independence and an equality of rights:

In feminist discourse today, fashion occupies a site of ambivalence.... While dress can be potentially liberating for women, especially in drawing attention to the construction of identity (and of femininity, in particular), many feminist scholars continue to view fashion as a form of capitalist and patriarchal oppression.... However, historians such as Valerie Steele and Kathy Peiss have emphasized the role that women played in these industries, which were in fact some of the few public arenas women were able to enter in the early twentieth century....<sup>79</sup> Writing about the creation of the cosmetics industry, which occurred at approximately the same historical moment the Yezierska's ... narrative ... takes place, Kathy Peiss rejects the contemporary feminist critique of beauty culture as "a cornerstone of women's oppression". By emphasizing the role that women – many of them immigrant and African Americans – played in the development of this industry, Peiss argues that such a view is too simplistic. These businesswomen were not pawns of men who dictated beauty standards, nor did they opportunistically benefit from the victimisation of other women. Instead, they "redefine[ed] mainstream ideals of beauty and femininity," thus proving both gender and racial identity to be "surprisingly malleable".<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Lori Harrison-Kahan, "No Slaves to Fashion: Designing Women in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Anzia Yezierska," in *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, ed. Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), 314.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.



Discussing the ‘early stages of the developing cosmetics industry, from the 1890s to the 1920s’, Peiss explains that ‘women formulated and organized “beauty culture” to a remarkable extent.’<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, she highlights the fact that ‘many of the most successful entrepreneurs were immigrant, working-class, or black women. Coming from poor, socially marginal backgrounds, they played a surprisingly central role in redefining mainstream ideals of beauty and femininity in the twentieth century.’<sup>82</sup> Peiss expounds on these points: ‘Cosmetics today seem quintessential products of a consumer culture dominated by large corporations, national advertising, and widely circulated images of ideal beauty. The origins of American beauty culture lie elsewhere, however, in a spider’s web of businesses.... Women played a key role.... Indeed, the beauty industry may be the only business, at least until recent decades, in which American women achieved the highest levels of success, wealth, and authority.’<sup>83</sup> This historical context provides substance to Sonya’s entrepreneurial story in *Salome*.

Peiss explains how businesswomen such as Helena Rubinstein, Elizabeth Arden, Madam C. J. Walker, and Annie Turnbo Malone ‘mark an ongoing tradition of female leadership’;<sup>84</sup> these women ‘chartered a path to mass consumption outside the emergent system of national advertising and distribution’ and ‘in doing so, they diminished Americans’ suspicion of cosmetics by promoting beauty care as a set of practices at once physical, individual, social and commercial. Their businesses transformed the personal *cultivation* of beauty – the original meaning of the expression “beauty culture” – into a *culture* of shared meanings and rituals.’<sup>85</sup> While Sonya obviously represents poor immigrant female entrepreneurship, fairness, egalitarianism, and this wider ideal of making beauty something that could be shared is clearly in Sonya’s mind when she creates what Ziskind names the “Sonya Model”:

All night long, she worked like a thing possessed. The gown she had dreamed and longed for had seemed simplicity itself, the easiest thing to do.

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<sup>81</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 4.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

But as tried the tricotine on the figure, it fell into hard lines, and hardness in a woman's dress was an unpardonable sin to Sonya's eyes.

She brushed back her hair slowly.

"Ach," she mused, "what is it I want? I want that beautiful plainness that only the rich wear. A dress that looks simple enough for the poor only that it's different" (169).

In a conversation with Hollins at the end of Chapter Twenty-Three, Sonya further emphasizes her view on opening out the beauty industry to people of all social and economic groups: "'Buy beauty!" she stormed illogically. "That's what's so wrong. Beauty should be for those who love beauty, not only for those who can buy it"' (178). It is at this point Hollins suggests that they will open a shop selling "'beauty for those who love it, beauty that is not for profit"' (178), to which Sonya states, "'I never burned so for something in my life like I burn for this. In the midst of the ready-mades of Grand Street, a shop of the beautiful – that's to be my settlement!"' (178). Sonya's response encapsulates much of what the novel is about: the question of how individual freedom and individuality can be attained without huge disparity in the distribution of wealth; and the question of how the masses can rise together *and* in doing so be individuals. This is partly about the age-old problem of balancing the needs of the individual against the needs of society – though of course societies are simply large groups of individuals – and partly about the more modern problem of how individuality can be retained in a world of mass markets and enormous population growth.

Kathy Peiss suggests that Helen Rubinstein 'never achieved her dream that society would quit viewing beauty culture as a "frivolous or wasteful expenditure of time" – a view that had much to do with lasting stereotypes of women.' However, she does believe that 'by drawing upon female sociability and customs ... women entrepreneurs made formerly hidden and even unacceptable beauty practices public, pleasurable, and normal. 'In this way', she continues, 'they contributed substantially to modern definitions of femininity, to the growing emphasis on making and monitoring appearance, and to the centrality of commerce and consumption in women's lives.'<sup>86</sup> Sonya may not have given much thought to this long term effect of her ideals, but her beliefs and actions certainly mirror those of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 95.

the women who really did begin the building of the beauty industry. And in presenting Sonya as mirroring these women, Yeziarska demonstrates another layer of complexity to her writing. Sonya is presented as helping to build a world in which the 'making and monitoring of appearance' is central. This is particularly true for women, and as such Sonya's actions could be seen as almost anti-feminist. And yet at the same time Sonya is a powerful feminist role model because of her strength of character. Yeziarska seems to be acknowledging that few issues have simply two sides to them, and in doing so she is suggesting a role for women in society that combines being 'feminine' with being strong, wilful and bold.

### Religious Imagery and the Salome Myth

Sonya is presented in a number of different ways throughout the novel. Images of flame and fire are frequently associated with her, to the point that Yeziarska clearly intended the reader to view Sonya as representing these elemental forces. There are within the novel at least forty instances of the words 'fire', 'flame', and 'burn', in various forms and inflections, linked directly with Sonya. Most prominent among these instances are when Sonya first meets Hollins and when she has her first arranged meeting with Manning in the Russian café. In the first case, she is described as the previously twice-mentioned 'blazing comet from out of a clear sky' (22); in the second, she is called 'a creature of air and fire' (37).

As well as these passionate, fiery suggestions, there are more negative representations of Sonya. The unavoidable image is that presented in the title of the book: Sonya as a Salome figure. Salome, 'according to Jewish historian Josephus', was 'the stepdaughter of Herod Antipas' who 'in Biblical literature ... is remembered as the immediate agent in the execution of John the Baptist.'<sup>87</sup> Salome's role in John the Baptist's death has, however, arguably been exaggerated by the popularisation of the story in Christian art, particularly in the Renaissance, and by Oscar Wilde's one-act play *Salome*. In this play, Salome is portrayed as desiring John the Baptist and being angered by his rejection of her. Wilde, who knew all of the various classical depictions of her, wanted his Salome to be both

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<sup>87</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Library Edition <http://library.eb.co.uk/all/eb/article-9065112?query=salome&ct=null>, accessed 1 April 2012), s.v. "Salome."

sensual and chaste.<sup>88</sup> Images of Salome had abounded in art and literature for centuries; notably, a novella based on the story was published by Gustav Flaubert in 1877 and subsequently adapted by Jules Massenet into an opera in 1881, but, says Mario Praz, ‘it was Wilde who finally fixed the legend of Salome’s horrible passion. There is no suggestion of this to be found in Flaubert’s tale (*Hérodiades*), in which, according to Mario Praz, Salome is merely the tool of her mother’s vengeance and after the dance becomes confused in repeating the instructions of Herodias’.<sup>89</sup>

The fact that Salome is not mentioned by name in the Bible highlights just how much the Salome myth is an artistic creation. Reference to her is found in Chapter Sixteen, verses six to eleven of the Gospel of St Matthew. Known in the Authorized King James Version simply as ‘the daughter of Herodias’, Salome is offered anything she wants by Herod as a reward for dancing in front of him and his guests. Her mother is angry because of John the Baptist’s condemnation of her marriage, and she persuades Salome to ask for his head on a plate, a wish that Herod reluctantly grants. Gittel makes direct reference to the Biblical Salome when she says to Sonya, “We’ll see where your wild love-madness will land you – whether with all your crazy dances you’ll get the head of your John the Baptist” (58).

Even more suggestively, Yeziarska describes Sonya as ‘a Salome of the tenements striving to be Mona Lisa’ (85) at the moment of Manning’s arrival for his visit to her apartment. She has spent \$100, a vast amount borrowed from Abe, to make the apartment clean and bright, and she has achieved a clean, simple appearance that fools Manning into thinking such a home is a real possibility for the poor of the ghetto. It could be said that Manning is walking straight into Sonya-Salome’s trap, for Sonya is also painted as being a woman who ‘vamps’ men. Vamping was a popular phrase in the early part of the twentieth century; it was used to describe sexually aggressive women who deliberately set out to use their femininity to attract men. The image of the vampire was popular in film and there was a fear among some white Anglo-Saxon American that exotic immigrant ‘vamps’

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<sup>88</sup> Derrick Puffett, “Introduction,” in *Richard Strauss: Salome*, ed. Derrick Puffett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2-3.

<sup>89</sup> Mario Praz, “Salome in literary tradition,” in *Richard Strauss: Salome*, Puffett (ed.), 16.

were seeking to marry American men and ‘pollute’ the race. Film historian Diane Negra expands on this point:

The hypersexual cinematic vamp of the 1910s and 1920s was in essence, [*sic*] a thinly disguised incarnation of the threat of female immigrant sexuality. The figure was multiply deployed to quell both fear of uncontrollable female desire and the spread of immigrant values into the dominant culture. Just as the sexually insatiable woman might somehow enervate seminal substance, the ambitious immigrant might drain the country’s resources dry.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps pertinently, Gittel tells the lovelorn Lipkin that “women like Sonya are a race apart” who can “no more help vamping men than roses can help giving out their perfume” (11). A further reference to the vamp or vampire approach of Salome, and by symbolic association therefore Sonya, is found in the words of Mario Praz when he is discussing Oscar Wilde’s depiction of Salome: once she has secured the decapitated head of Jokanaan (who represents John the Baptist), ‘she fastens her lips upon it in her vampire passion.’<sup>91</sup>

In some respects the artistic development of the Salome myth matter little; what matters instead is the fact of the myth’s existence. Richard Strauss’s hugely successful opera ‘Salome’, which premiered in 1905, is based on Wilde’s interpretation of the story, and adds another contemporary note to this ancient myth. Yeziarska would no doubt have been fully aware of the connotations she was making when linking Sonya with Salome: the confused, used agent of murder, or the sensual, almost Bram Stoker- or Le Fanu-like vampires of *Dracula* and *Carmilla*. The very title of the novel, *Salome of the Tenements*, conjures many vivid images, but ultimately, and very cleverly, only adds to the sense of ambiguity and enigma that is felt about Sonya throughout the story.

Despite these arguably unflattering images of her, Sonya is not presented in a wholly negative light. For all her selfish intent, she does have the dream of helping all those in the ghetto rise out of their poverty, and she is passionate in her dislike of the way that the rich treat the poor. An ‘unconquerable illusion’, Sonya puts a ‘spark of life’ back into the ‘long-buried soul’ of Honest Abe, the pawnbroker (60-2). Most tellingly though, Gittel, who morally condemns Sonya throughout the novel,

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<sup>90</sup> Diane Negra quoted in Lisa Botshon, “The New Woman of the Tenements: Anzia Yeziarska’s Salome,” *Modern Fiction Studies* v. 56, no. 2 (2010): 243.

<sup>91</sup> Praz, *Richard Strauss: Salome*, 16.

though mostly because of her own jealousy, calls to mind ‘another Sonya – on her knees before the rusty grate coaxing the kettle to boil, while Gittel lay helpless with an aching chest – a Sonya whose vibrant voice and glowing face were the only sunlight in her room during the lonely days of her illness’ (7). Clearly, Sonya has very caring qualities. When she looks upon the ‘pale Lipkin’ and the ‘worn and faded Gittel’, “she could almost have wept with pity” for them and she determines to help them as soon as she has the power to do so (9-10). Sonya’s belief is that one must help oneself so as to be in a position from which they can help others.

Looking more closely at the religious symbols incorporated in *Salome of the Tenements*, references can be found that suggest an ‘otherworldliness’ about Sonya. Some of these references suggest that she is divine, others indicate that Sonya has elements of a devil figure. These demonic overtones are far less overt than similar suggestions about, for example, Heathcliff in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, and there is no suggestion in *Salome* that Sonya is actually supposed to represent the devil. Yet as well as multiple references to her divinity, textual evidence that suggests a demonic side to her character does exist, and it adds further complexity to a character whose many layers make her difficult to read. “You’d sell your soul for a million dollars” (6) is what Gittel tells Sonya at the beginning of the novel, a charge that Sonya does not directly deny. Sonya tells Gittel in the same exchange that she feels “the gods are holding out their hands to me”; she believes that they are offering her all that she desires if she only has the daring to try to achieve what she wants. Gittel’s response is a clear evocation of Sonya as all-powerful but it is ambiguous as to whether that power is angelic or demonic: “You’d draw the very dead from their graves when you begin to burn for a thing” (8). Hollins sees her as ‘an electric radiance divinely formed of flesh and blood’ (24) and during their second meeting he tells her, “You, who dropped down to me from an open sky, you have given me the first chance of my life to work for love” (28). Manning joins Hollins in thinking of Sonya as more spirit than human when he considers her a ‘creature of air and fire’ (37); only just before this thought, however, he has considered her as a ‘primitive woman’ (35), which is a viewpoint to which she adds weight when she tells him that in the company of American women she feels “like a wild savage” (37). Sonya is goddess, devil, primitive – anything and everything but an ordinary woman.

Yet despite the demonic and primitive representations, the image of Sonya as divine is the most prevalent. During their meeting to discuss the quality of Sonya's apartment, her landlord adds to the list of those who imagine her this way: 'The Essex Street plutocrat felt keenly that a superior being from another world had dropped down from the sky' (50). Her father suggests a mixture of the primitive and the ethereal when the reader is told of his feelings about the 'untamed wilfulness of his changeling daughter' (83) who is 'born in the blackest poverty of a Delancey Street basement', (83) a description that could be read as representing hell. The passage that perhaps most reveals Sonya as a deity occurs when Manning finally submits to his physical desire for Sonya at Greenwold, which she has called "God's own Eden" (106):

This was victory – a vindication of her conquering power that made the suns and spheres of heaven and earth sing back in triumph to her. She *had* plucked the moon-beams out of the moon. She *had* drawn the sun-rays out of the sun. She *had* dried up oceans – leveled mountains – gathered all the forces of creation in the burning passion of this man (107).

However, even here there is ambiguity: if the interpretation of the novel's final scene is that Manning is left as the broken figure, then the seeds of his downfall are sown at this moment of physical surrender, and such a reading which would make Sonya more demonic than divine in that moment of human passion. These various examples demonstrate the uncertainty as to whether Sonya is angel or demon in this allegorical reading. Whether she does or does not truly understand the implications of her actions and their effect on others, Sonya certainly is aware of how people perceive her: when she has finished creating the "Sonya Model", she has a 'thrilling dream' in which she flings the garment at Hollins' feet and cries, "That beautiful thing – that's me – myself! They all said I was a faker – a vamp. They said I was a Salome wanting the heads of men, but you know I was only seeking – seeking for the feel of the beautiful" (170).

### Sonya as New Woman

The reading of *Salome* as an immigrant novel is one on which a number of critics focus. Although this element is very important and adds another layer to the novel's complexity, such an interpretation should not be the only focus when

studying the text. While Sonya ultimately returns to be with those of her own background, there are points in the novel when both she and Hollins actively state that they should be defined as something more than simply Jewish. Hollins tells Sonya, “I’m a Jew – yes – but I’m more than a Jew. I’m an artist. An artist transcends his race” (28). This desire to be defined as something more than Jewish is complicated in Sonya’s case because she also states boldly and proudly that she is a Jew, which is yet another ambiguity about her character. At one point she refers to shoddy, ready-made furniture as being only “fit for waps and kikes” (57). There is a possible sense of irony in her use of the derogatory racial terms, but given Sonya’s conflicting emotions, it is more likely that she is at this moment seeking to separate herself from her ethnic group.

Among those who seek to look beyond the reading of *Salome* as primarily an immigrant novel is Lisa Botshon, who focuses on Sonya as a New Woman. She explains how the term was ‘used well into the twenties to designate a number of women’s agendas. The term might be used to describe a suffragist of the teens or a flapper of the twenties who had no interest in using her new right to vote.’<sup>92</sup> However, she points out, ‘it was typically assumed that the New Woman was a native-born, middle-class, white American.’<sup>93</sup> Botshon also points to the fact that ‘contemporary reviewers discussed it [*Salome of the Tenements*] solely as an immigrant narrative written by an immigrant author’, and ‘many of today’s scholars who analyze Yeziarska’s works also read them within a predominantly immigrant sensibility.’<sup>94</sup> Sonya clearly challenges the assumption that the New Woman was native-born and middle class, and Botshon makes the important point that ‘to circumscribe Yeziarska into a discourse of immigrant literature is to elide her debt to popular culture and segregate the author from the larger world in which she lived and interacted.’<sup>95</sup> This reading of Sonya as a New Woman is crucial to fully understanding the novel and its role in presenting a difficult but ultimately positive and hopeful model of how a poor, working-class immigrant can rise up and does not have to remain trapped by the circumstances of her birth.

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<sup>92</sup> Botshon, “The New Woman of the Tenements”, 233.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 234-5.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 235.



This point links well to the fact that when her writing was published many critics attacked Yeziarska's writing style, possibly, according to Christopher Okonkwo, 'because it was not modernist.'<sup>96</sup> He explains how in the 1920s contemporary critics attacked her novels for 'their sentimental prose, melodramatic plots, and for Yeziarska's marginality.'<sup>97</sup> Moreover, he continues, some critics found her plot structure 'simple, even crude' and her characters lacking development and being 'full blown archetypes of a culture'.<sup>98</sup> Katherine Stubbs, in her introduction to Yeziarska's *Arrogant Beggar*, quotes the *New York Tribune's* accusation that Yeziarska displayed "'a complete and amusing ignorance of gentile minds, and somehow a faint lack of good taste.'"<sup>99</sup> Okonkwo paraphrases Stubbs to expound on the criticism of Yeziarska's writing: 'Modernism was associated with high culture, sophistication, formalist innovations, and, quite relevantly, masculinity.'<sup>100</sup> In addition, he explains that 'Yeziarska strongly objected to modernism's masculinist insistence on form, abstraction, and emotional restraint, and would not adapt her techniques and concerns to the period's literary aesthetics.'<sup>101</sup> It is arguably somewhat misguided to try to identify modernism in terms of gender, and even if an attempt to classify it this way is accepted, the fact that Mike Gold would have strongly disagreed with the notion of modernism being masculine highlights the differences of opinion that existed in the literary world. Gold, in fact, held an almost opposite view about modernism to that held by many: he saw it as middle class and effete. If modernism is linked with masculinity, it highlights how the view of the majority often dominates perceptions of history because mainstream history does not usually teach alternate views such as those held by Mike Gold.

In her introduction to *Arrogant Beggar*, Stubbs takes up the issue of modernist critics sneering at Yeziarska, making a powerful defence of Yeziarska's style:

When we go beyond modernist standards of literary assessment, we can consider Yeziarska's writing style as a choice, a way of persuasively presenting

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<sup>96</sup> Christopher N. Okonkwo, "Of Repression, Assertion, and the Speakerly Dress: Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*," *Jewish American Literature* v. 25, no. 1 (2000): 130.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Katherine Stubbs in *Arrogant Beggar* [1927] (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), Introduction vii.

<sup>100</sup> Okonkwo, "Of Repression, Assertion, and the Speakerly Dress", 130.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

the social and economic conditions of her narrative in a way that at moments strategically disregarded the contingencies of the realist formula. It is only when we take this style seriously that it becomes possible to see the way the sentimental was a mark of the Yiddish artistic tradition, a tradition of which Yeziarska was acutely aware. A melodramatic style and overwrought emotionalism were prominent features of the Yiddish plays and literature that were popular on the Lower East Side during Yeziarska's youth. Furthermore, when we consider the moralizing tone of texts such as *Arrogant Beggar*, Yeziarska's use of a sentimental style appears all the more skillful; sentimental fiction has historically been used to persuade and had been uniquely well-suited to conveying ethical messages.<sup>102</sup>

Stubbs makes an effective case: not to take Yeziarska's writing seriously because of literary arguments about style is, in effect, not to fully understand what she is doing. And the statements of Okonkwo bear out Lisa Botshon's point about how circumscribing Yeziarska into a discourse of immigrant literature elides her debt to popular culture and segregates her from the larger world in which she operated.

Of course Yeziarska was an immigrant author and her characters do have to battle with the duality of being poor, working-class immigrant women with ideals about assimilating into American culture, but Yeziarska's writing deals with so many other issues: it has strong feminist themes; it discusses race and class, as well as the interaction between the two; it raises questions about the rights and wrongs of the American economic system; it considers the role of the individual within that system and the manner in which groups of people exist within it; it asks questions about social conventions and what purpose, if any, they serve; finally, it analyzes the effects on people of emotional love and sexual desire. *Salome of the Tenements* demonstrates these issues better perhaps than any of Yeziarska's other works. This is in part because at the novel's conclusion Sonya appears to embrace her Jewish heritage with positivity and does not see it as an oppressive weight from which she cannot not escape, and it is in part because Sonya is a woman who rises in the world through her own independent efforts. It is a rise that can be separated from her culture and religion, even though she achieves her success while mixing with those of her own culture and at the same time is attempting to mix, through marriage, with wealthy Anglo-Saxons. Therefore, while the reading of *Salome* as an immigrant novel is an obvious and crucial one, for the purposes of this thesis it is the

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<sup>102</sup> Stubbs in *Arrogant Beggar*, Introduction, xviii.

presentation of Sonya as an individualistic, hard-working riser that is of more importance, although the two are not mutually exclusive.

## Conclusion

### A Comparison between Yeziarska and the Other Authors Being Used in this Thesis

In terms of her life story, Anzia Yeziarska stands very much apart from the other authors being studied in this thesis. She alone of the four authors was a proletarian writer because she alone of the four was, at least in her youth, working class. And despite her involvement with the Rand School, and her associations with both Socialist and Communist Party members, Yeziarska never played an active role in politics. In this respect there are similarities between her and Fielding Burke, and comparisons can also be made between their fiction: both authors focus on the plight of the individual more than they consider the plight of a mass group, although Burke does also focus on a mass group more than Yeziarska.

Yeziarska's work has never been considered to be propagandist by critics, and she was clearly not following any kind of contemporary party line in her writing, be it political or literary, for she was certainly not a communist or a modernist. Yet there is a powerful message in her work, which makes it a perfect example of the way in the interaction between propaganda and art has extremely blurred edges. Yeziarska's writing could be said to exemplify Orwell's assertion that all art is to some extent propaganda, and perhaps the subtle nature of Yeziarska's message makes it all the more effective.

In their fiction, both Burke and Yeziarska make some attempt to portray the wealthy as something more than one-dimensional ogres who care nothing for the lives of the poor. Burke does this in particular through the characters of Derry Unthank and Bly Emberson; Yeziarska has a number of establishment characters who are, it could be argued, portrayed with a degree of sympathy: Arthur Hellman in *Arrogant Beggar*; Hugo Seelig in *Bread Givers* (although his ideal that every child should pronounce words in an identical way is redolent of oppressive attitudes held by many of the middle- and upper-classes); and perhaps even John Manning. Sonya recognises that even though she disagrees with his settlement house method of philanthropy, Manning 'was a rich man who might be spending his money on self-

indulgence – automobiles, race-horses and champagne’ (139), a thought that is a defensive reaction to the ‘sardonic’ words of Hollins: “Playing with poverty is more exciting than knocking golf balls” (139). Hollins, by contrast, has made his money, mostly from selling to the rich, and he makes no attempt to give anything back to the ghetto from which he came; he has even Americanized his name to better fit in to the world of wealth in which he operates, and the affordable clothing shop that he and Sonya plan to open will be a little shop “on the side” (178).

Although Sonya’s often quoted ‘Democracy of Beauty’ speech highlights her individualistic view that a person should play the hand that life has dealt them, she does make reference to Bolshevism and Capitalism, demonstrating an awareness of these issues:

“Talk about democracy.... All I want is to be able to wear silk stockings and Paris hats the same as Mrs. Astorbilt, and then it wouldn’t bother me if we have Bolshevism or Capitalism, or if the democrats [*sic*] or the republicans [*sic*] win. Give me only the democracy of beauty and I’ll leave the fight for government to politicians and educated old maids” (27).

Douglas Goldstein responds to this speech:

Sonya’s concept of a “democracy of beauty” also points to her own ability to offer creative and perhaps fantastic solutions to seemingly intractable problems. She does not deny or ignore the inequality and injustice that surrounds her. Rather, she acknowledges the odds against herself and other immigrants but then imagines ways of getting around these difficulties.<sup>103</sup>

His response may seem overly positive in light of Sonya’s words, but it does add weight to the suggestion that there is more to Sonya than simply her pursuit of money and beauty.

Sonya displays a rare moment of class solidarity, though not in this case towards the individual worker concerned, when her disapproval of those who choose to work as servants is made evident: ‘She was accustomed to live among nobodies, but everyone there hoped at least to become a somebody. This maid’s servile deference was the language of admitted inferiority’ (114). Sonya’s belief that the poor should not willingly subjugate themselves has strong echoes of the beliefs of union members in the works of Myra Page, Grace Lumpkin, and Fielding Burke. In a further comparison, the power and force that Sonya possesses are comparable to

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<sup>103</sup> Goldstein, “The Political Dimensions of Desire”, 47.

those of Ishma in Burke's *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling*. Interestingly, despite both characters being endowed with much feminine beauty, the personality traits they possess are often associated with strong male characters such as those presented by Naturalist novelists as they analyzed the idea of Force.

Organized religion is a crucial feature not only in Yeziarska's work but in that of Burke, Lumpkin, and to a lesser extent Page. Religious symbols and images are most prominent in the work of Yeziarska, although Burke does include some in her fiction. However, the importance of religion to the characters in the novels of all the authors is a feature that definitely connects the work of Yeziarska with that of the other authors. As well as helping to highlight the importance of religion to the characters, Yeziarska's repeated use of religious imagery in *Salome* is important to the narrative because it emphasizes the sense that Sonya is different from the people around her, and these ethereal qualities seem to play some part in her success.

The similarities between the writing of Yeziarska and that of the other authors end here. With the character of Sonya, for example, Yeziarska presents a protagonist whose major aim in life is not only to rise out of poverty but to achieve riches – even if her financial aims are moderated by the end of the novel. None of the other authors in this thesis have protagonists with this intention, though naturally they would all like to live in some degree of material comfort. The fact that Sonya does dream of helping the poor of her ghetto once she has achieved her fortune does not change how different a central character she is from any others here. Hollins' attack on the character of Manning goes some way to explaining the difference between Yeziarska's Sonya and the protagonists created by the other authors: "The stupid fraud! The self-deceiver! It's his wealth that has made him spiritual enough to want to get rid of his wealth" (30). This attack is rather harsh; the point has already been made that Manning is at least attempting to do some good with his money, and he can hardly be blamed for being born into wealth; moreover, if Hollins were to have children, they too would be born into a privileged existence. Yet the point he makes is an important one, and the accusation could be labelled against the three more politically active of the authors being studied here. In short, they could afford to be socialists and communists while living in relative

comfort, and Yeziarska could not. This is though a somewhat simplistic argument that ignores the relative financial comfort in which Yeziarska lived at least some of her life, and the fact that the other three authors were far from being rich. And it could be said of the characters created by Burke, Lumpkin, and Page that they could not afford not to be socialist and communists. There is, nevertheless, something worth considering in this point.

Through the character of Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements*, Yeziarska presents an enigma that matches the confused and unclear history of her own life. Ultimately though, Sonya is similar to all Yeziarska's literary characters: they use the attributes they have to raise themselves out of the dirt and poverty of the ghetto. The image of dirt and grime is repeated many times by Yeziarska to reinforce the living conditions of the urban poor, but her characters all demonstrate a very American belief that with hard work and willpower, financial success is a very real possibility. And no character demonstrates this belief in action more clearly than Sonya Vrunsky.

## Fielding Burke (Olive Tilford Dargan)

### Burkes's Life

Fielding Burke<sup>1</sup> was born on 11 January 1869 in Grayson County, Kentucky, but, as Kathy Ackerman explains, after just ten years 'her mother's poor health forced the family to move to a drier climate. They relocated to Doniphan, Missouri, then to Warm Springs, an abandoned resort town in northern Arkansas.<sup>2</sup> Burke's parents were both teachers, and Joseph Urgo details how she herself gained an education at the Peabody, 'a teacher's college in Nashville' and later at 'Radcliffe College in Boston',<sup>3</sup> where 'she studied English, French, economics, and philosophy.'<sup>4</sup> While at Radcliffe she 'had to supplement her lessons with books from the Harvard library because teachers who were "remote" from life could not teach her what she desperately yearned to know: exactly how economic injustice had become institutionalized in America.'<sup>5</sup> Her feeling that the academics teaching her were detached from the reality experienced by so many American people must have remained with her throughout her long life, for there is in her 1930s novels a tension between reality as it was experienced by the working class and the representation of that reality in art.<sup>6</sup> Art is to a certain extent portrayed in these novels as a bourgeois luxury produced by the middle- and upper-classes almost exclusively for the middle- and upper-classes. This was a somewhat common tension in 1930s, and although it is probably not her intention, Burke almost gives the reader a sense at times that art has no value.

Fielding Burke married aspiring poet Pegram Dargan in 1898, and after living for six years in New York, they moved to the Blue Ridge Mountains, specifically to Round Top Mountain in Almond, North Carolina. At the age of thirty-eight, Burke

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<sup>1</sup> Although her real name was Olive Tilford Burke, she published her most well-known novels (*Call Home the Heart* [1932], *A Stone Came Rolling* [1935], and *Sons of the Stranger*[1947] under the pseudonym Fielding Burke, and she will be referred to as Fielding Burke from here onwards.

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Cantley Ackerman, *The Heart of Revolution: The Radical Life and Novels of Olive Burke* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph R. Urgo, "Proletarian Literature and Feminism: The Gastonia Novels and Feminist Protest," *The Minnesota Review* v. 24, no. 2 (1985): 76.

<sup>4</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Representation of reality is a problematic notion because representation is by its very definition not reality, and reality itself is a concept that is open to interpretation. For more on this, see the discussion about Proletarian Art in Chapter Two.

became pregnant, but her daughter, who was born prematurely, survived for only two hours. Although it is thought that she had decided against having children, the loss of her daughter affected her greatly.<sup>7</sup> She visited England in 1911 ‘without Pegram ... and did not return to the United States until 1914 – except for intervals in which she returned to Boston to care for her ailing friend Ann Whitney, the famous sculptor, who was financing her travels.’<sup>8</sup> Little is known about her time in England, but according to Ackerman she did meet ‘radical writers, members of the Fabian Society and the rising Labor Party.... She also observed the violent struggles of the suffragists there.’<sup>9</sup>

Pegram Dargan died 1915 in ‘what was reported as an accident at sea’,<sup>10</sup> but it has more recently been suggested that it may have been a suicide pact with his brother. Fielding Burke continued to live and work on the farm in Almond; she worked very hard there, to the extent that finding time to write was often difficult for her. Burke published a number of plays and poetry collections throughout her life, but she was in her sixties when the first of her three novels was published. She died at the age of ninety-nine on 23 January 1968.

Many of details about Fielding Burke’s life have been brought together by Kathy Cantwell Ackerman in her book-length study of Burke’s life and works, *The Heart of Revolution: The Radical Life and Novels of Fielding Burke*. There are, however, many gaps in Burke’s biographical details, and although this lack of information might seem to echo of the lack of detail known about Anzia Yezierska’s life, there is a crucial difference in the reasons for such paucity of facts: while it would appear that at times Anzia Yezierska deliberately styled her public image, Burke’s desire appears to have been that her own life should remain relatively private. She was ‘an accomplice to her own obscurity because she refused to promote herself, trusting posterity to judge her artistic contributions fairly’,<sup>11</sup> believes Ackerman, who outlines three factors that ‘make it doubtful that a complete biography will ever be possible: (1) Burke did not encourage biographical

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<sup>7</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.



sketches during her lifetime; (2) she often requested that her letters be destroyed for political reasons; and (3) three separate fires during her lifetime destroyed many of her papers and manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> In spite of these factors, however, enough biographical information does exist to enable an overall sense of her life and political opinions to be garnered.

Another interesting connection between Burke and Yeziarska is that they both shared a close and significant friendship with Rose Pastor Stokes. Stokes spent some time with Burke on Round Top Mountain in 1930 while she was suffering with cancer, and Burke sent Stokes money throughout Stokes's treatment. They corresponded throughout their friendship, and dreamed of one day travelling to Russia together to witness firsthand the communist revolution; however, Stokes died before they could realise this ambition.<sup>13</sup>

Despite having published twelve books under her real name, Olive Tilford Dargan, Fielding Burke chose to release her three most potentially controversial books, and her only novels, under this pseudonym. Her early literary efforts had generally been viewed positively; 'she received a literary prize for her fiction in 1916 and an honorary doctorate from the University of North Carolina in 1924.'<sup>14</sup> Although it is her 1930s fiction that will be analysed in this chapter, all three of her novels, *Call Home the Heart* (1932), *A Stone Came Rolling* (1935), and *Sons of the Stranger* (1947) deal with issues surrounding the labour movement and are usually categorised as proletarian fiction.

Burke's reason for choosing to publish under an assumed name is not entirely clear. She would surely have known that her true identity would be discovered and revealed, which it was soon after the publication of *Call Home the Heart*; it is possible, therefore, that she was seeking to create some extra interest in her new book by using a new name. She herself says that she wanted the name to be 'like a sword fresh from the scabbard ... [to] stick in the public mind.'<sup>15</sup> However,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> Urgo, "Proletarian Literature and Feminism", 76.

<sup>15</sup> Fielding Burke quoted in Anna W. Shannon, "Biographical Afterword," in *Call Home the Heart* [1932] by Fielding Burke (New York: The Feminist Press, 1983), 433.

in spite of this explanation from Burke, Ackerman suggests some other possible reasons for the use of the pseudonym:

First, her political convictions were stronger than ever; she had never published anything that so blatantly called for economic revolution. She may have chosen a pseudonym because she was uncomfortable having her politics so widely exposed. Another possibility is that she wanted to keep the path clear to continue publishing poems under her own name.... Having published a proletarian novel, would she still be able to publish the occasional apolitical poem in a journal such as *Scribner's* or *Atlantic Monthly*? But these possibilities do not explain why she chose the masculine name. Why should she care whether her readers knew she was a woman? She certainly did not consider herself any less capable of writing a fine novel than a man. But the reviews clearly show that some critics thought gender was an appropriate factor to consider in evaluating her work.<sup>16</sup>

It is rather unlikely that Burke was concerned about her political opinions becoming public knowledge, at least if she truly believed that 'it is impossible to live and not join the fight.'<sup>17</sup>

Anna Shannon Elfenbein disagrees with Ackerman regarding the gender suggested by Burke's chosen pseudonym, believing the name to be 'gender-neutral'.<sup>18</sup> Elfenbein's suggestion that Burke chose to use a name that has no specific gender associated with it 'in part to ward off criticism from those who believed that the proletarian novelist should be a man who had worked in the coal mines and steel mills'<sup>19</sup> seems a likely explanation for the choice. Ackerman supports this view when she explains that Burke 'did not want critics to be dismiss the sentimental qualities of her novels as being 'typical of women's writing',<sup>20</sup> especially as she would have been aware that '*Call Home the Heart* could be criticized for both its politics and for its sentimentality'.<sup>21</sup> Wes Mantooh adds to this discussion with the assertion that 'her adoption of the male-sounding pseudonym ... seems calculated to create further distance from her self-image as a

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<sup>16</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Fielding Burke quoted in Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Shannon Elfenbein, "A Forgotten Revolutionary Voice: "Woman's Place" and Race in Olive Burke's *Call Home the Heart*," in *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*, ed. Carol S. Manning (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 195.

<sup>19</sup> Shannon Elfenbein, "A Forgotten Voice", 195.

<sup>20</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

female poet sympathetic to but not of the working class.<sup>22</sup> From the point of view of this thesis, the suggested reasons for Burke's decision to use a pseudonym and to choose the one she did is interesting because it suggests a belief on her part that it is difficult for an author to 'escape' his or her social and economic background and status.

Burke's decision to publish her novels under a different name is also important when trying to understand her viewpoint. She has been referred to as a 'fellow traveler',<sup>23</sup> a term used to describe those who were communist sympathizers but who never actually joined the party. Even though Burke's decision not to join the Communist Party may have been linked to the party's seemingly innate sexism, it neatly highlights the sense of inbetweenness in Burke's work and in what is known of her life. This position of holding multiple viewpoints is clearly evident in her two 1930s novels, although of the few critics who have studied Burke's work, even fewer have discussed this idea in any detail. Ackerman asserts that 'the struggle to find a balance between her *message* and her art is the central critical conflict of Burke's career'.<sup>24</sup> Given that she is portrayed as a radical writer and that left-wing ideas are central to her writing, this idea may sound far-fetched, but there is in fact a great deal of sense to it. Shannon says that Burke's 'allegiances are clear from her associations and her writing',<sup>25</sup> but this statement is potentially a somewhat sweeping presumption because close analysis of Burke's work suggests that her allegiances are not all that clear.

This point about the use of a name may appear to be disconnected from Fielding Burke's representations of poor whites in the U.S. South of the 1930s, but it is important because there is a great deal of radical 1930s writing, yet other writers did not use pseudonyms. Moreover, Burke wrote at a time of political strife, she wrote in support of the labour movement, she clearly placed importance on the name of her central character, Ishma Waycaster, and yet despite her name being held in high esteem within the literary world, she chose not to use it to demarcate

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<sup>22</sup> Wes Mantooth, "You Factory Folks Who Sing This Rhyme Will Surely Understand:" *Culture, Ideology, and Action in the Gastonia Novels of Myra Page, Grace Lumpkin, and Olive Burke* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 131.

<sup>23</sup> Shannon Elfenbein, "A Forgotten Voice", 195.

<sup>24</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Shannon, "Biographical Afterword", 433.

her overtly radical writing. This fact leads to the point that although she clearly did write in support of the labour movement, and her writing was and is rightly read as radical, there is evidence within her 1930s novels to suggest that Burke was not completely certain of the best way in which to achieve a fairer, more equal and more peaceful world. Combined with the manner in which she lived her own life, this uncertainty on Burke's part becomes even more evident when the individualist nature of her 1930s novels is considered. Developing this notion further, there is a conflict in Burke's writing of the 1930s between times when she narrows possible interpretations while at other times she opens them out, and this conflict will be analysed later in the chapter.

Fielding Burke was a middle-class, educated woman, like all the authors being studied in this thesis except Anzia Yezierska. She was neither rich nor poor, and she certainly had to work for a living. She did, however, have friends wealthy enough to provide for her in certain circumstances. As has already been stated, her journey and subsequent stay in England were probably financed by such friends, although when Shannon writes that Burke travelled 'perhaps with the financial help of such friends as Anne Whitney and Alice Blackwell'<sup>26</sup> she demonstrates less certainty about the source of Burke's funding than that pronounced by Ackerman. Wes Mantoath expounds on the point about Burke's financial situation:

Burke's inherited family values and the experiences she garnered moving through life shaped a perspective from which she, as a writer, could inhabit a somewhat ambiguous class position. Though her roots were rural, she eventually moved within urban intellectual circles and traveled abroad. Though she is more economically privileged than many of the subjects of her socially-conscious writing, she also struggled to earn a living. And though she possessed keenly developed aesthetic and literary sensibilities, she was also sensitive to the economic factors that prevented large segments of her society from developing or sharing in these sensibilities.<sup>27</sup>

That fact that Burke was a Southerner would have made writing about the lives of Southern people a natural choice for her, for it represents her writing from experience. *Highland Annals*, her 1925 collection of short stories, is a series of sketches written about the people among whom she lived. She was the landowner, they her tenants, but she knew them, moved among them, and often helped them.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 437.

<sup>27</sup> Mantoath, *You Factory Folks*, 118.

Burke, however, along with many of those on the political left, refused to believe the truth about what was actually happening in Russia under Stalin by the late 1920s and into the 1930s. Emma Goldman did sound a warning in her 1923 book *My Disillusionment with Russia* (republished unedited in 1924 as *My Further Disillusionment with Russia*, though neither the initial edits nor the titles were approved by Goldman) and her 1931 autobiography *Living My Life*, but the warning was ignored. This refusal to believe in a dark side to the communist revolution in Russia is understandable given the ideological hopes of those on the Left, as well as the amount of time and energy invested in those hopes. But it is not just with hindsight that the negative aspects of Stalin's reign have become known; they were being discussed at the time they occurred. And an unwillingness to denounce Stalin undermines the hopes of those on the left who believed in building a more humane society.

Burke is, to an extent, tainted by the same brush. Her name change may have been designed to distance herself from radical writing, and perhaps also to avoid investigation by the government in the form of the Bureau of Investigation (renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935); from behind this pseudonym Burke possibly felt that she could explore ideas and express opinions about communism and Russia more freely. There is certainly evidence in *Call Home the Heart* of a belief and hope in Russia, demonstrated by the central protagonist, Ishma. Ishma is a physically and emotionally strong woman, fiercely independent and oftentimes fiercely passionate. Towards the end of the novel, Ishma muses about the possibility of effecting social change: 'In China, in India, in Germany, in Bulgaria, they were fighting and dying in an effort to break their chains. And they were breaking them. Not all were dying. Some would march over the bridge of death. All Russia was on the other side.'<sup>28</sup> In another scene, Derry, a doctor who befriends Ishma and teaches her about socialism, is trying to convince Ishma that she needs some rest, and his words reveal what appears to be a further example of Burke's support for Russia. Referring to Ishma's state of mind, he tells her, "'I'd be in the trough of despond too. Stalin, Hitler and Chiang Kai-shek would all look alike

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<sup>28</sup> Fielding Burke, *Call Home the Heart* [1932] (New York: The Feminist Press, 1983), 372. Subsequent references in parenthesis are to this edition.

to me” (326-7). It is possible that he is referring to their physical appearance, but given the political nature of the novel, it is also possible that he is suggesting a difference between these three dictators. At least some historical views would in fact indicate that all three of these dictators were not as different as may have been thought at the time, especially in the case of Stalin and Hitler.

### **Burke’s Style**

The two novels that will be focused on in this chapter are *Call Home the Heart* (1932) and *A Stone Came Rolling* (1935). *Call Home the Heart* is based around the Gastonia textile mill strike of 1929, although the novel centres on the life of Ishma Waycaster; *A Stone Came Rolling* is a sequel that traces Ishma’s development and her more active participation in the labour movement.

Fielding Burke’s style is today viewed as a mix of romanticism, radicalism and feminism. Cathy Ackerman expands on the view of Burke as romantic when she explains why Burke does not have ‘the lasting literary reputation she deserves’:<sup>29</sup>

Her earliest works, collections of verse dramas, were published at the point in the history of the American theater when drama was becoming a commercial enterprise. The closet drama was quickly becoming an obsolete form. When Burke was publishing her first volumes of poems, between 1914 and 1922, critical debates raged over modernism. Burke’s verse was too reminiscent of the romanticists whom Ezra Pound and others were rejecting in favor of imagism. As a writer of short stories about the Appalachian mountains, Burke became a “regionalist,” a literary classification which has often been more detrimental than helpful to a writer’s reputation.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to understand or explain why the regionalist label should be viewed negatively in the literary world, for it could be argued that all writers are regionalist because every piece of writing is set somewhere. But it would seem that writing set in an urban environment is not labelled as regional, while that written about rural life is. And what is termed as regionalist, or local colour writing, has long been treated dismissively by many critics.

Ackerman, however, suggests that ‘Fielding Burke cared about literary criticism to the extent only that she expected her books to be reviewed fairly.’<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

Furthermore, Ackerman feels that Burke ‘seems to have had little interest in criticism as a genre in itself; that would represent for her the ultimate in bourgeois futility. She would probably agree with Paul Lauter, ‘who compares criticism which “departs from the real social milieu in which most of us live and work” to the Boudingi bird that flies in “ever-decreasing concentric circles until it violates its own anatomy”’.<sup>32</sup> The point here is clear: literary criticism should be about illuminating texts and the contexts in which they are set, and it would appear by her actions that Burke would have supported such a view. In making the decision to spend most of her life living in the mountains of North Carolina rather than in somewhere like New York City, Burke chose to reject living among other literary people and instead lived much of her life among a predominantly uneducated working-class population. Of course this decision does add a further sense of mystery when considering her identity: she was landlord not tenant, and therefore she was not one of the people among whom she lived in the sense of having their limited finance and opportunities.

Stacy Alaimo refers to *Call Home the Heart* as a ‘socialist-feminist novel’,<sup>33</sup> and although this is an accurate description to an extent, the novel is also a romance. Laurie J. C. Cella develops the notion of Burke’s 1930s writing as part-romance when she states that ‘the events in Ishma’s life evolve into what I will call “radical romance,” a narrative strategy in direct contrast to those employed by male authors in the 1930s.’<sup>34</sup> Cella defines her term ‘radical romance’ as ‘a romance plot that makes a claim for female sexuality and desire as a positive experience, even as it comes in conflict with or interferes with the masculine ideologies at stake within the proletarian conversion narrative.’<sup>35</sup> Unlike some critics, Cella analyses *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling* together. She explains her reasoning thus: ‘Burke made important revisions to the standard proletarian conversion narrative in her construction of Ishma Waycaster, revisions which become clearer when her

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<sup>32</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 175.

<sup>33</sup> Stacy Alaimo, “‘Skin Dreaming’: The Bodily Transgressions of Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler, and Linda Hogan,” in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick D Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 123.

<sup>34</sup> Laurie J. C. Cella, “Radical Romance in the Piedmont: Olive Tilford Burke’s Gastonia Novels,” *Southern Literary Journal* v. 39, no. 2 (2007): 38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Gastonia novels are read as one continuous narrative.<sup>36</sup> She makes an important point here, particularly in the context of how women are presented and treated in 1930s radical writing by female authors. It would seem that Burke conceived *A Stone Came Rolling* very much as a direct continuation of *Call Home the Heart*: referring to the manuscript for *Call Home the Heart*, Anna Shannon explains that ‘even before she finished ... she began planning the second volume “to put [her heroine] through the Marion outrage with its incredible murders.”<sup>37</sup> It is for these reasons that both Burke’s 1930s novels will be used in this chapter, although the primary focus is on *Call Home the Heart*.

Perhaps the clearest and most important issue regarding Burke’s style relates to the question of how to define art. As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, distinguishing between art and propaganda is no easy task, and perhaps no ultimate demarcation can ever be made. However, taking a definition proposed in Chapter Two, albeit a problematic one, that propaganda aims to consciously manipulate people’s ideologies, there is little doubt that elements of propaganda exist in Burke’s two 1930s novels. Yet at the same time, if art is taken to be something that is less invested in the conscious manipulation of people’s ideologies and more open to broad and possibly contradictory layers of interpretation, as well as having elements of imitation and representation, then Burke’s novels certainly have artistic elements as well.

Considering the interaction between art and propaganda is important because at the point in the novel where Ishma leaves the mountains and goes to live in Winbury, the fictional Gastonia, Sylvia Jenkins Cook states that ‘critics who reviewed it decided almost unanimously that the transition from art to propaganda occurred, only to be redeemed into art by the final return to the mountains.’<sup>38</sup> Jenkins Cook expands on this point in her critical afterword to the 1983 Feminist Press edition of *Call Home the Heart*. She suggests that ‘a false sense of a conversion of Ishma’s personality in the novel’ led critics to assert such a belief. ‘The assumption,’ she adds, ‘seemed to be that Ishma was only truly herself in the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup> Shannon, “Biographical Afterword,” 433.

<sup>38</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 103-4.



“artistic” setting of rural poverty, embellished with Indian folklore, pretty scenery, humor, and ballads, while on the mill hill, in the ugly monotony of ten-cent stores and vulgar peep-shows, she became a tendentious tool of propaganda. Yet Ishma’s essential character remains unchanged as she moves through these different environments.<sup>39</sup> There is a question here about what Jenkins Cook means by the phrase ‘essential character’, which calls to mind the issue of essentialism, the idea that there are ‘essential’ properties to things that exist before the individuals that represent that thing. Simone de Beauvoir’s criticism of such an idea in relation to human men and women was explored in the second chapter.

It is also possible that critics were negative about the section of the novel set in Winbury because they did not like the stark reality that it portrays. ‘Undoubtedly the rural poverty is more picturesque than its urban counterpart’<sup>40</sup> suggests Jenkins Cook. Furthermore, there is every chance that some critics simply may not have liked the message that is being delivered in this urban part of the novel: Ishma’s education in left-wing ideology, and a representation of labour relations and economics that seems to suggest communism as the only solution to the mill workers’ poverty make difficult and at times uncomfortable reading, and the one-sided nature of the view that is presented can be frustrating.

Upon its publication, *Call Home the Heart* received a mixed response from contemporary critics, although Wes Mantooh suggests that ‘nearly all reviewers gave high praise to the novel, ending and all.’<sup>41</sup> Laurie Cella notes the following:

V.J. Jerome argued that Burke’s focus on Ishma’s personal struggles weakens the political focus of the novel: “[Ishma] is friend of the working class, a sincere friend, but not wholly of it”. Conversely, more politically conservative critics found Burke’s depiction of the Gastonia strike a distraction from what they viewed as a more compelling narrative about Ishma’s life on the mountain.... Elmer Davis argued that “you will have to go a long way to find a more flagrant example of the disastrous consequences of a head-long collision between faith and art”.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Burke’s apparent simplification of political debate appears evident to some critics. ‘Fielding Burke made propaganda a conscious objective in her writing.

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<sup>39</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook, “Critical Afterword,” in *Call Home the Heart*, 454-5.

<sup>40</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> Mantooh, *You Factory Folks*, 130.

<sup>42</sup> Cella, “Radical Romance”, 40.

She certainly considered her messages to be “true,” but also she clearly intended to use her writing to teach’ explains Ackerman.<sup>43</sup>

Discussing the issue of propaganda in literature, Ackerman describes how ‘Writer-as activist’ Earl Browder echoed Du Bois’s 1926 viewpoint and ‘insisted that the only acceptable art is art that acknowledges the political situation of the times and attempts to correct it’.<sup>44</sup> Browder, speaking at the 1937 Second American Writers’ Congress, was effectively saying that art should be propaganda. Yet there at least possibly is a distinction between the two, however blurred its edges may be, and as has already been stated, Ackerman believed that the effort to find a balance between her message and her art was of central importance to Burke. Ackerman also feels that *Call Home the Heart* was not truly propaganda because ‘one requirement of propaganda is that it must not contain too many levels of meaning, and *Call Home the Heart* is definitely a multi-dimensional novel that is more concerned with the ambiguities and ambivalences of individual characters than with delivering the correct collective rhetoric.’<sup>45</sup> Burke herself pointed out that ‘even *King Lear* could be considered propaganda because it pleads for a more merciful and charitable society and a “wiser solution of family troubles.” Yet people do not think of *King Lear* that way; it is simply considered a work of art.’<sup>46</sup> Cathy Ackerman neatly concludes this discussion: ‘Of course, the issue of propaganda versus art is oversimplified here – as it was by many of the critics in the United States during the thirties. The implication that a writer must choose either art *or* propaganda was suggested by the failure in the early thirties of American magazines such as the *New Masses* to incorporate the Soviet concepts of “dialectical materialism” and the “living person” into their aesthetic theory.’<sup>47</sup> Ishma’s development and education in left-wing ideology throughout Burke’s texts of the 1930s does adhere very successfully to the Soviet concept here described, yet Burke does also manage to create what might be called a human feel to her writing as well, a sense that she has considered the different layers of emotional reactions that people experience in life.

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<sup>43</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Cathy Ackerman states that ‘the issue of style is directly linked to the issue of audience. If a major purpose of revolutionary rhetoric is to inspire the masses of workers to overthrow their capitalist employers, then it follows that the presumed audience for the proletarian novel was the working class. Would the average working-class reader be impressed by innovations in technique?’<sup>48</sup> Burke’s traditional narrative style would probably have suited those who were not interested in the inventive literary styles of Modernism, but her novels are long and the pace is at times rather slow, features that do not lend themselves to mass appeal. There is evidence to suggest that the working class was reading serious literature. Ackerman explains how in response to an article by Louis Adamic in which Adamic said that the “overwhelming majority” of working people do not read serious literature’,<sup>49</sup> Robert Cantwell asserted that ‘the working class actually does read more “serious” literature than the public realizes’.<sup>50</sup> There is more than just a trace of unconscious middle-class bias in Cantwell’s separation of the working class and the public; he might have been better to have used the wording ‘than those who take an interest in these matters realize’, or something to that effect. This is a minor point, however. To support his argument ‘he referred to a survey conducted by a St. Louis librarian which showed that working-class readers were reading serious literature and that, moreover, they were especially receptive to the socialist views of George Bernard Shaw.’<sup>51</sup> Ackerman explores how ‘John Bowman conducted a similar library survey for his 1939 dissertation on the proletarian novel. By comparing the circulation rates of bestsellers among working-class readers to the circulation rates of proletarian novels, he determined that “the proletarian novel makes a better showing than might be expected.” The library records for ... [a number of proletarian novels] showed that these titles were in “approximately continuous circulation”.’<sup>52</sup> Clearly there was an appetite for reading among the working class (and therefore the public), and it would seem that proletarian novels were a popular choice.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

## *Call Home the Heart and A Stone Came Rolling*

### Observation versus Involvement

Sylvia Jenkins Cook writes the following words about the Gastonia strike of 1929:

The ramifications of the Loray mill strike upon all the habits and beliefs of the tightly knit community made it a favorable research project for journalists and sociologists; there was even more tempting material for fiction writers in the romantic background of the mill worker, their close folk ties with their former mountain life, the flamboyant rhetoric of the public life of the South, the macabre courtroom incidents of the trial, and pervasive violence of the town, and the vicious assassination of the strikers' ballad maker. This was the essence of stirring left-wing journalism – or of dramatically updated local color fiction.<sup>53</sup>

Building on Jenkins Cook's point that the Gastonia strike created good material for writers, Wes Mantooth explains Burke's feelings on the issue: 'Taking academic or aesthetic interest in class struggle without true involvement, Burke suggests, is a reprehensible form of (dis)passion. Simply observing how workers' responses to oppression measure up to theories about lower-class agency may, in fact, be little different from the act of judging an artistic work's aesthetic merits.'<sup>54</sup> Burke makes this point clearly in Chapter Fourteen of *Call Home the Heart*, "Friction and Feast", in which the young, middle-class socialist Pritchett hosts a dinner party before leaving Winbury. One of those attending is Mrs. Owensby, 'a grey-haired novelist, hoping to pep up her output for an uninterested public' (363). Burke writes acerbically of Owensby: 'with her little feet rooted in aristocratic ground, she could safely sway and sniff toward the questionable areas of humanity' (363). Pritchett himself is also depicted as somewhat hypocritical; he has gotten himself involved on the fringes of the labour movement, and has, in fact, been arrested for speaking out in the socialist cause. However, as Wes Mantooth observes,

Pritchett's class background ... compromises his presumed liberal sympathy for the working class. Although he had been "born of socialist parents" and "before he was eighteen [...] had spoken on every 'red' corner in New York, Brooklyn, and Chicago, his parents had been able to supply his necessities and rescue him from jails; consequently his experiences had always lacked certain pangs of reality" (357). Predominantly aesthetic desires have brought Pritchett

<sup>53</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 166.

to Winbury; he had sought a new experience, but now will return north because “the scene had refused him entertainment” (357).<sup>55</sup>

Burke is making a significant point here, and one that is often overlooked by critics. She is questioning how possible it is for a member of the middle class, or, perhaps more accurately, someone who has money supporting them, to be part of the labour movement in the truest sense.

In making her criticism of Pritchett, Burke is effectively criticizing herself, other writers who merely add comment to the struggles of labour, and even the validity of a thesis such as this. On the other hand, a cause of any kind needs advertising, and writers producing work with a politically left wing message provide a potentially very effective form of advertising, especially if, as in the case of Fielding Burke, the work produced receives critical praise and interweaves its message with an engaging narrative. In so far as this is true, Burke contradicts the belief that E. A. Schachner set forth in 1934 that ‘revolutionary literature is at its weakest in the novel because: “Those who are, in the abstract, most capable of writing a revolutionary novel are usually engaged in helping to precipitate the revolutionary situation toward which the revolutionary novel must point...”’.<sup>56</sup> Ackerman highlights the fact that ‘as so many writers of the thirties discovered, involving themselves directly with the labor movement greatly reduced the amount of time in which to write.’<sup>57</sup> Burke, though, was able to write effective revolutionary novels despite not being directly involved in the labour movement – or perhaps because of that fact. Her novels also bring to mind the notion that the best art might also make the best propaganda.

The actual extent of Burke’s involvement in the labour movement is unclear. She never joined the Communist Party, but there is much ambiguity beyond that fact. Ackerman asserts that ‘a few letters survive which indicate that .... [Burke] was a well-known activist in the thirties and frequently corresponded with Communist Party members’, a fact that Anna Shannon confirms when she explains that ‘Burke’s activities in the years from 1939 to 1935 [*sic*] are vividly recalled, not by her contemporaries, who are all dead, but by the radical “youngsters” she knew in North Carolina. One of these individuals, a former CIO organizer, recalls Burke’s

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 165-6.

<sup>56</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

willingness to allow her mountain cabin to be used as a retreat when things became too “hot” in nearby industrial towns.<sup>58</sup> Burke did reveal a very plausible possibility for why she never joined the Communist Party, writing that ‘they are narrower than Lenin, their master. I wish they had his great breadth. He realized the communism could never succeed without the great fringe of sympathizers who were not of the party.’<sup>59</sup>

Although she does confirm that Burke visited both Gastonia and Marion during their strike periods, Anna Shannon says that ‘we do not know whether Burke involved herself in the 1929 textile mill strikes’.<sup>60</sup> Ackerman writes the following about Burke in Gastonia:

The strike began on 1 April 1929. By 26 April, Burke had already been made to feel at home among the strikers themselves and was trying to gain access to strike headquarters. Because she knew the organizers had to be extremely cautious about who they allowed to visit their headquarters, she asked Rose [Pastor Stokes], who was working as assistant secretary of the Workers International Relief, to use her influence to persuade the comrades that Burke was on their side in the struggle: “I’m stamped ‘middle-class’ all over.... But the strikers like me and make me feel like blood-kin – bless their weary bones!”.... Burke wrote later that she had to leave Gastonia much sooner than she had planned because of recurring back and stomach problems.<sup>61</sup>

Ironically, there is a suggestion here that she herself was acting in the same manner as her characters Prichett and Owensby in *Call Home the Heart*, although with uncertainty over the exact nature of what Burke did in Gastonia, this accusation is perhaps a little unfair.

Burke also uses a scene from near the end of *A Stone Came Rolling* to criticize those who merely observe, and in this instance she is also attacking those who romanticize the lives of poor white mountain folk and do not seek to help improve their living conditions. Derry Unthank, Doctor Schermerhorn, and Fairinda have gone with Ishma and her son Ned to the mountains to help Ishma recover from Britt’s death. The following scene occurs while they are staying at a Tavern to break the journey:

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<sup>58</sup> Shannon, “Afterword”, 442.

<sup>59</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 47.

<sup>60</sup> Shannon, “Afterword”, 441.

<sup>61</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 27.

A guest, Ryburn[,] ... recounted with ardor a scene of the day. It had filled him with hope for a genuine human art once more, said Ryburn. The machine had not torn all beauty from life as man must live it. Here in the shelter of the mountains it had survived. He had seen it surviving.<sup>62</sup>

As Ryburn continues eulogizing about the beauty he sees in the poverty of the local people, Schermerhorn attempts to explain the brutal realities behind the 'old ballad' into which Ryburn feels he has been 'peeping': infant mortality, blind children, deformities, goiter. But Ryburn seems unwilling or unable to see the truth, responding instead that his 'friend, Duttlow, ought to get hold of this. There's a writer who can polish off human interest like a looking-glass and not lose a twinge of it' (356) and even stating 'My blood boils when I think of the destructive fingers of progress reaching up here to destroy such a scene' (355).

Burke's depictions of mountain life might be read by some as picturesque and as more romantic than the part of the novel set in Winbury, but she does not present anything other than the harshness of life in the mountain environment, and she does so in direct terms. The result is that a reader might be led to question whether conditions in the mountains were really as bad as Burke portrays them to be. But historical facts would suggest that they were: many people left the mountains to work in the urban cotton mills, yet happy, contented people do not usually leave a place unless compelled to do so. As Grace Lumpkin portrays in *To Make My Bread*, some mountain people were tricked by mill agents into believing life in the mills was far better than it actually was. Gwen McNeill Ashburn supports this presentation, stating that 'many from the mountains, men and women, were targeted by advertisements, promising money, housing, and a way off the farm if they came to work in the mills.'<sup>63</sup> But for something to have enough allure to make people give up the only life they have ever known, there must be something pushing them away from that life. Most mountain people left because what Jenkins Cooks calls the 'remote[ness] and desperate poverty'<sup>64</sup> of mountain life became too much to bear.

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<sup>62</sup> Fielding Burke, *A Stone Came Rolling* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1935), 354. Subsequent references in parenthesis prefixed with *ASCR* are to this edition.

<sup>63</sup> Gwen McNeill Ashburn, "Working Without Nets: Early Twentieth Century Mountain Women in Fiction," *The Journal of Kentucky Studies* v. 24 (2007): 136.

<sup>64</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 87.

Burke claimed not to believe in war. Ackerman explains that ‘she believed that war is such an inappropriate gesture for the “upright animal” that “we ought to do it on all fours and use our teeth”.<sup>65</sup> Yet in spite of this belief, there is little in either of her novels of the 1930s to suggest that she is absolutely against the use of violence. Granted, Ishma has a personal dislike of killing anything, musing about Britt that ‘at heart, she believed, he disliked bloody work almost as much as she did’ (76); and Burke does clearly present the Communist Party insistence on strikers not carrying guns in Gastonia, although this does appear to mirror historical fact. Yet such suggestions of non-violence are negated by the presentation in the novels of Russia as representing all things good and by the reminders within the books that patience and tolerance will not be enough for the workers to achieve their aims. Cathy Ackerman quotes Anna Shannon to explain that while she was living in England Burke may actually have started to believe in violence as a means to an end: ‘Burke’s letters ... from England outline the continued development in her thinking as she moved from advocating passive resistance and Christian patience, to a recognition that violence might be necessary to effect social change.’<sup>66</sup> In *A Stone Came Rolling*, Ishma bitterly considers the religious reverence of the workers in Dunmow:

It was the fear growing within her that they would never get the vision of a better earth. Get it clear enough to act upon it. Christian patience was grounded in their bones, flowed sluggishly in their blood. Above the bog of pain they lifted yearning eyes to an unknown shore (*ASCR 117*).

Perhaps it is easier to comment with hindsight, but history suggests that violent revolution does not usually result in a happy and peaceful society. A fairly brief study of human history informs this fact: it can be argued that the difficult aftermath of the French Revolution produced the dictator Napoleon, and the Russian Revolution produced the dictator and mass-murderer Stalin. The point has already been made here that Burke and many others on the political left demonstrated a certain degree of unwillingness to consider the negative side of the Russian experiment, even though uncomfortable truths about it were filtering through by the 1930s. Closer to home from Burke’s perspective, the horrifying

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<sup>65</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Anna Shannon quoted in Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 11.



brutality of the American South, exposed by Burke when she describes lynchings and the threat to Ishma of a flogging that would 'break her for life' (378), can be in part attributed to America's past, and in particular the history of the South. The inhumanity of slavery, the killing and domination of American Indians, and a devastating civil war have one thing in common: violence. Burke lived in a land scarred by the effects of this violence. It is strange, therefore, that she may not have understood that a place with so much violence in its past, particularly a place like America that was born of violence, will face a hard struggle to suppress that violence in its future.

In *Call Home the Heart*, the fight scene near the end of Chapter Six in which Britt challenges and then battles with the preacher Siler in the name of defending Ishma's honour is presented in a somewhat positive light. Having lived among Appalachian mountain people, Burke was in a good position to know how they might react to such an event, and it is therefore believable that it may have been seen as an exciting and positive occurrence by those who witnessed it. The event is simply accepted as part of mountain law: 'Britt was praying that Siler would prove stubborn and not cry quits. This, by mountain law, would give him the right to pound his opponent' (172). And Britt's victory almost seems to redeem Ishma's infidelity in the eyes of the people: "'If she does [ever come back]," said Mandy Welch, with good courage, "maybe she'll be welcome"' (177). Although the reader has to accept these reactions as probably realistic, particularly when Ackerman's assertion that Burke's 'understanding of the hard life of the working class was inspired by personal experience rather than mere observation'<sup>67</sup> is taken into account, there is a notable lack of any authorial voice suggesting anything undesirable about the use of such violence as a means of solving problems; it would, therefore, seem that Burke is tacitly supporting such action. Despite its violence, she is also juxtaposing the relative fairness of a fight between mountain men (and from the evidence within the two novels this would seem to be an exclusively male preserve) who chose to partake in it and followed at least some sense of a rule set, with the unfairness of the capitalist system of mass production that is portrayed as existing in the mills of

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<sup>67</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 9.

Winbury. At least in the mountain fight, if one man cries quits, the other man is not permitted by mountain law to continue attacking him. There is no such get out clause for the workers of Winbury.

The Presentation of the Poor in *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling*

Fielding Burke's novels of the 1930s both focus heavily on Ishma, who, as will be discussed later, occupies something of an ambiguous class position in spite of her grinding poverty. She is clearly an exceptional human being, and strives for something in life beyond what she has. By using Ishma as her central character, Burke demonstrates that the very tag 'the poor' is hollow. 'The poor' are simply people who have little or no money or resources. In a society with little socialist thinking, at least in the years leading up to the New Deal, and therefore little provision from the state, people with little or no money were unable to partake in the education system to any meaningful extent, which in turn left them few or no options with regard to employment; they were forced to accept whatever was offered to them. Beyond this, Burke presents the poor as no different a group of people to any other group.

There are those like Bainie and Jim who are extremely lazy, living off the work of others, and lacking any aspiration, even being critical of those like Ishma who aspire to something more – in fact, Bainie is warned by Laviny more than once in *Call Home the Heart* not to push Ishma too much in case she leaves; Laviny recognizes that Ishma is 'almost single-handed in her struggle to make the farm and keep them all decently alive' (13). The use of the word 'decently' echoes the desire for respectability.

There are those like Britt who are happy to toil and accept their lot and position in life.

There are those like Bert and Cindy Wiggins who are victims of consumerism. They want material goods and, in order to get them, commit themselves to instalment plans that they can almost never hope to pay off, meaning that they are unable to stop working even though that work is killing them: "“Stop work?” cried Cindy, amazed. “Why, I’m payin’ on a sewin’-machine, a ‘frigerator, an’ a bed-room set! I’ve wanted a sewin’-machine since I was twelve years old, an’ I’m gettin’ it

now” (213-4). Burke is not being critical of Cindy’s desire to own a sewing machine; rather, she is attacking an economic system that requires people to work themselves to death in order to obtain relatively modest material possessions.

There are those like Ishma who aspire to education and a life not tied exclusively to the land or to the raising of children – although she is torn over her feelings about these things.

There are people who are more inclined to violence and people like Britt who are less inclined to it.

There are people like Rad Bailey who desire to climb the social ladder within the existing social and economic system and who are willing to ignore the plight of others in their drive to achieve for themselves.

There are those like Kepton Ira Kearns, known as Kik, who want better working conditions for the industrial poor but believe in working with the rich capitalist owners and trusting to the Christian patience that Ishma so bitterly feels is ‘grounded in’ the people’s bones.

In short, Burke presents a wide variety of different types of people, which is much as one would expect to find in life. If there are common traits among the majority of the poor she represents, it is in their acceptance of their lot and in the tribal and racist characteristics that they demonstrate. When Rad considers the likelihood of the truth about him and Ishma becoming known, he knows that Bert and Cindy Wiggins will not say anything: ‘They were too clannish ... to get folks from their own home into trouble. They’d never talk against the mountains to any low-country “lint-heads”’ (197). This clannish and individualist nature of the mountain folk is a feature that works against them when it comes to trying to organize against the mill owners.

#### Race and Gender in *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling*

Fielding Burke’s two novels of the 1930s are clearly feminist in nature: they present a powerful female protagonist who is able to work as physically hard as any man and yet who can still display a maternal instinct for humanity, even though such an instinct towards her own children takes a considerable time to develop. Burke undoubtedly challenges what Cella calls ‘the decidedly masculine tone set by critics

like Mike Gold, whose 1928 call to “Go Left” was directed at the “wild (male) youth, at work in the coalmines” (Folsom 188).<sup>68</sup> She does so with a woman who, like a female equivalent of Jack London’s male *Übermensch*, is in some ways almost superhuman, yet in others so completely human.

When comparing *Call Home the Heart* with the other Gastonia novels written by women, Suzanne Sowinska states that

the four women novelists ... were in general agreement on the importance of representing the feminist aspects of the strike in their novels.... [However,] the positions that these women novelists take on the Negro question provide a wide range of interesting and informative literary responses to white racism in the 1930s.<sup>69</sup>

Fielding Burke confronts this contentious issue in both her 1930s novels, but particularly in *Call Home the Heart*. Anna Shannon Elfenbein believes that ‘Burke’s decision to make race pivotal in her novel was advanced for its time.’<sup>70</sup> She also states that ‘despite its enlightened treatment of racism as an impediment to revolutionary action, it must be acknowledged that the depiction of racial prejudice in *Call Home the Heart* is contaminated by what would now be recognized as racist rhetoric and stereotypes.’<sup>71</sup> Paula Rabinowitz feels that *Call Home the Heart* is reactionary, perhaps to a large degree because of Ishma’s racist behaviour at the end, and she excluded it from the 1987 anthology of revolutionary literature written by women, *Writing Red*, which she co-edited.<sup>72</sup> However, Burke was writing in the 1930s, a time of different perspectives and language use compared with the 1980s. Moreover, Ishma’s racism and her subsequent battle with herself because of it is probably one of *Call Home the Heart*’s great strengths. Burke is drawing critical attention to the issue of racism and demonstrating how much it pervades society. Ishma is shown to be very human: she has faults; she is a product of her upbringing and of her society. This is realistic, and makes the novel far more believable than it otherwise might have been.

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<sup>68</sup> Cella, “Radical Romance”, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Sowinska, “Writing Across the Color Line: White Women Writers and the “Negro Question” in the Gastonia Novels,” in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 123.

<sup>70</sup> Shannon Elfenbein, “A Forgotten Voice”, 197.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>72</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 128.

While critics have been relatively silent on the matter, it should not be forgotten that Ishma is upset and angry with herself for her behaviour towards Gaffie Wells, the black woman whom she physically strikes in an attempt to escape her grateful embrace after Ishma has saved her husband from a lynch mob:

For endless hours Ishma sat on the train trying to realize who and what she was. She felt that she was travelling with a person unknown.... With clarity cruel to herself she kept looking back into the dark little room which was "home" to the family of Butch Wells. She saw a creature in her own shape committing an act which she had felt was impossible to her mind and heart (385).

Shortly afterwards Ishma decides that she is 'an animal' and a 'Neanderthal woman'. And although she initially insists that she will just have to accept these facts about herself, she is presented a few years later in *A Stone Came Rolling* as having overcome her racism to a large extent. Precisely how she achieved such a change of mindset is never truly explained, but it is clear that she has undergone a period of what would now be termed 'soul searching' and has focused her mind on making this improvement to her personality. Ishma is, after all, a self-improver. It could be argued, therefore, that the conclusion of *Call Home the Heart*, far from being racist in itself as some have suggested, is a realistic portrayal of a woman struggling to come to terms with a racist outburst that has horrified both her and, one can only hope, the reader. Such an exposition of racism is thought-provoking and enlightening.

### **PRESENTATIONS OF ISHMA in *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling***

#### **Her name**

Ishma's name is evocative of Ishmael, the wandering sailor who narrates Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and this fact foreshadows the journey that she will take; the connection to Melville's epic also suggests the quest-like nature of that journey. Joseph Urgo highlights a biblical reference regarding her name: 'Ishmael the outcast (Gen. 16-25)'.<sup>73</sup> In the biblical book of Genesis, Ishmael is a son of Abraham by his wife's handmaid, Hagar – a union made with the blessing of Abraham's wife Sarai (Sarah) because she was too old to conceive. Towards the end

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<sup>73</sup> Urgo, "Proletarian Literature and Feminism", 77.

of *A Stone Came Rolling*, the reader learns that Ishma means 'waste', something that Ishma feels 'she must make ... untrue' (ASCR 381). She is sometimes referred to by her mother and sister as Ishmalee, and by Britt as Ish-my-own. Ishma's surname, Waycaster, indicates the role that she will play among the community later in the novel as one who casts the way forward – almost forcing the way to be the direction she chooses. This also connects with the sense of her strength, as if she is actually able to control people's political will and direction.

### The Imagery Used to Present Ishma

Ishma's appearance is striking and beautiful, often haunting the minds of those who meet her. She is described at one point as 'the tall woman with grey eyes that seemed to breathe as they questioned the universe' (189). Her appearance is described in detail at the beginning of the novel:

At eighteen she was tall and strong, with no droop of the shoulders to hint of the burden they carried.... She had Granny's broad forehead and delicate eyebrows that were almost horizontal until their sudden ending in a down-flung curve. The eyes, too, of twilight grey were direct from grandmother Starkweather.... Ishma's face was open, true to sun and sweet air, but her eyes, with all their level honesty, guarded reserves unknown to herself. Her head was by no means small, though it looked so because of its perfect rondures hugged by short, dark curls. She held it with the light grace of a deer. Derry Unthank, in later days, said that when she looked at him straight and full, he could sniff the woods and see the parted leaves framing her lifted head and neck (12-13).

The connection made here between Ishma and the earth is repeated numerous times throughout the two novels. *Call Home the Heart* opens by telling the reader that 'Before she was seven, Ishma ... had joined the class of burden-bearers.... Six days of the week Ishma was merely a family possession, giving herself so effectually that no one suspected she was giving; so entirely that she did not suspect it herself' (1). She needs to spend time being at one with nature, away from humanity, to 'replenish her fount' (1) at least occasionally, and this adds to the sense that she is somehow connected to the earth. Later in the novel, while living in Winbury, she desperately seeks the public park, and despite its sparsity of vegetation, it is enough to provide her with the respite that she requires: 'The breast offered her was thin and unbounteous, but it served (232).

There is in the portrayal of Ishma a sense that she is almost super-human, particularly with regard to her physical and emotional strength, and yet at the same she is so very human, especially as she is shown to be compromised by her strong will on more than one occasion. This sense is summed up by Derry in *A Stone Came Rolling* when he and his cousin Bly are discussing their love for her:

When she came down from the mountains with the highland air still about her like a queen's mantle. She didn't seem quite human then. More like a beautiful tall tree, where I'd pause to watch the leaves so eager in the wind and sun. But that was my grand mistake. She was terribly human. So human, it turned out, that she made me feel like an embryo waiting for the blood supply (ASCR 266).

A number of times in the two novels, Ishma's presentation is almost mystical, as if she is from beyond this earth. And even though this is not literally true, she is certainly presented as a woman with incredible magnetism and a power beyond that held by most people. At the very least, she is extremely charismatic. Near the end of *A Stone Came Rolling*, Derry is almost overcome by 'a pagan desire to fall on his knees before the gods of the storm' (ASCR 379) as he watches an enraptured Ishma being enthralled by a mountain storm. Even when she is unconscious in hospital, Ishma is able to entrance people: 'Her face held the contours of remote bliss, and it was strange how great a sense of life the motionless figure gave out (233).' Derry suggests to her that if she decided to become a left-wing activist then she could be a Christ-like figure, telling her, "'You'll go barefoot with a wound in your side'" (250). She later quotes from the Book of Isaiah in a manner that suggests that Derry was correct: "'My people ... shall abide in peaceful habitations, and in safe dwellings, and in quiet resting places'" (293). Derry also tells her that she is "'the great Earth-mother'" as he wonders how she can "'be in love with a mere husband'" (294-5). A taxi man seems 'to mix her up with something celestial' (304). In *A Stone Came Rolling*, Derry watches her about to address the White Oak meeting and imagines she looks 'as if she had just landed on earth. Or was she leaving it?' (ASCR 339). At a union meeting, she asks a question that is described as being 'like a tongue of fire springing suddenly on a dark hearth' (ASCR 184).

These almost mystical images echo the similar descriptions of Sonya in *Salome*. They also contrast with the fact that Burke seems to indicate that there is no

afterlife: 'Ishma had heard that the spirit of the dead sometimes hovered over the grave of its body on the first night after burial, and that night she slipped out of bed to lie in the graveyard with her head on the fresh dirt. But granny gave no sign (7).'

Burke also refers to the notion of immortality as 'the first great invention of the conscious mind' (ASCR 345).

### Ishma, a Mother Earth figure

Lisa Schreibersdorf states that 'In *Call Home the Heart*, Fielding Burke used a communist leader's speech to represent communism as a nurturing, embracing mother....: "I have told you that communism is not a beast waiting in the dark to devour us and our children. It is a great mother calling us to peace and plenty ... [to] ... those arms of safety' (290).<sup>74</sup> Schreibersdorf then 'recalls a western cultural mythology of maternal relationships, whereby the maternal body can signify a space of connection'<sup>75</sup> before suggesting that 'the maternal figures in these [Gastonia] novels can function as a symbol reminding characters and readers of the possibility or fantasy of the space of connection; she is an emblem of this register or state.'<sup>76</sup>

It is not, however, just communism itself that Burke presents as a having maternal qualities. Despite the fact that for Ishma the thought of having children 'brought a blank terror to her mind' (112), and even though Burke states that 'Life was before her again' (243) after the death of her first child, Vennie, suggesting that she feels a sort of liberation from the burden of motherhood, Ishma is in some respects a Mother Earth figure. Building on her presentation as something almost spiritual, Burke makes a connection between Ishma and the Indian girl Sumaka, who according to legend disappeared into a 'blazing sumac, red as a woman's heart' (75). Sumaka become part of nature, part of the earth itself, and Ishma is at times presented that way. And she has the caring qualities that are often considered as maternal: 'Ishma never wanted anything killed' (76).

The idea of Ishma as a Mother Earth figure is connected with the contrasting presentations of her as being mystical and yet somehow of the earth at

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<sup>74</sup> Lisa Schreibersdorf, "Radical Mothers: Maternal Testimony and Metaphor in Four Novels of the Gastonia Strike," *Journal of Narrative Theory* v. 29, no. 3 (1999): 310.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 311.



the same time. In Chapter Five, a pregnant Ishma speaks to Britt in a voice that is 'dangerously natural'; Britt then stumbles over his use of his pet name for her, Ishmy-own: 'How could he call this strange woman that? Her superb head was carried high; her straight shoulders had thrown off every weight and were free in beauty. Was his head spinning, or was the dusk actually piling up around her like waters that bore her up and away from him?' (145). In this evocative passage, Burke describes Ishma in two contrasting ways: she is at once devastatingly human and yet at the same time a part of the dusk, part of the natural world; and even then, she is almost mystical, commanding the waters that will bear her away. Burke builds upon this representation a few pages later in the same chapter: Ishma 'was asking for more than life has ever given to anyone; an understanding of itself' (149). Burke then explains that 'in her early years Ishma had rested sanely on her love of beauty in nature, and her unthinking union with it' (149); however, 'with adolescence, beauty was not enough' (149), and although Britt provides a certain amount of fulfilment, 'life was again barren' (150) for Ishma, who 'didn't know that, to the mind born for questing, somewhere on its burning road, love and beauty must become hardly more than little nests for the comfort of the senses' (150). Ishma here is presented as very human, searching as an adult for answers, whereas when a young child nature had provided all she needed.

#### Ishma, the Self-Educated Riser

Ishma's indomitable grandmother, Granny Starkweather, who is described as having had a 'bright, detaining spirit' (1), used the Bible to encourage Ishma to read; however, she also taught Ishma to be a free-thinking, independent woman, telling her that "'a body has to know how to pick over'" (66) certain parts of the Bible, meaning that 'Ishma's mind ... learns early to sift the limited material available to her'.<sup>77</sup> It was by walking with Granny Starkweather that 'Ishma learned the way of a wind on the mountain, of water around a rock, of a goat on Devil's Spur' (6), lessons that Ishma never forgets. She explores the mountains alone after her grandmother dies: 'She never shared her high trail with anyone' (15). The rest of

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<sup>77</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 103.

Ishma's family does not see the value of education; in fact, her mother, Laviny, seems to almost mistrust knowledge, stating that "The gal knows too much. That sort always dies, er goes wrong, give 'em time" (8). Her mother is also critical of Ishma's attempt to teach her sister Bainie's children: 'She [Laviny] would slant her eyes disapprovingly on Ishma sitting down to teach the younguns their lessons when she'd never poked her head inside of a school-house (8).' Given Burke's experiences living in the mountains, it is likely that this episode captures a distrust of education that was prevalent among the poor Appalachians.

This representation of the poor also presents the clash of two cultures that was being experienced by mountain people at that time – that clash being between the world outside the mountains, which valued schooling and book-based education, and the isolated Appalachian mountain culture. Ishma learns in spite of her family, although she receives help in her education along the way: after her grandmother's death, a school teacher who recognizes Ishma's academic potential and is 'horrified to learn that Ishma had never been in school' (11) sends her copies of *Woman at Home* – the choice of publication is ironic considering Ishma's personality and later actions, but it does help to shape the domestic part of her complex personality. More importantly perhaps in terms of her education, Derry Unthank will become the person who educates Ishma in socio-political theories and ideas.

### Ishma, the Working-class Riser

Given that Ishma is presented as being on a quest towards the knowledge and understanding of the economics of capitalism and how to revolt against them in order to help raise the masses out of ignorance and poverty, and given that she turns to communism as the means by which to achieve this aim, it may seem strange to refer to her in the same way as Sonya Vrunsky from *Salome of the Tenements* has been referred to in this thesis: a working-class riser. Yet Ishma shares a number of traits in common with Sonya. Both are brought up in extreme poverty within families that believe, or at least appear to believe, in the absolute truth of religious dogmas. Both evince a tenacious belief in free will and a determination to succeed whatever the odds: Ishma does not allow her spirit to be broken even by the loss of

almost everything when hers and Britt's crops are trampled by cows. And both Sonya and Ishma dream of escaping their conditions, of breaking away, of rising. Both are endowed with a physical beauty that draws men to them, a fact that both women use to their advantage, even if Sonya does so far more overtly than Ishma.

At first, Ishma does not appear to be particularly concerned with clothing, but even though she never displays anything like the love of clothes that Sonya has, she does value the expensive green dress that Virginia Grant buys her; the dress also gains her advantages, making her appear to others like a 'lady'. Perhaps more significantly, she is wearing the dress, without really even being particularly conscious of the fact, when she produces her bravest moment of action and single-handedly saves Butch Wells from being lynched. There is a sense here of the effect on a person that clothing can have. Of course it is nothing like as strong or clear in *Call Home the Heart* as it is in *Salome of the Tenements*, and it is important to stress again that Ishma is unaware that she is wearing the dress when she goes out to save Butch; nevertheless, the suggestion of this power of clothing is made by Burke, who deliberately states that Ishma is wearing the dress at that point.

But perhaps the most striking similarity between Sonya and Ishma has already been mentioned here: it is found in the way in which the two characters' respective authors associate them with images of things both preternatural and elemental. A common image used for both women is fire. Ishma is mesmerized by forest fires; she loves to watch them, and it is during forest fires that she both leaves and returns to the mountains. Her grief at Britt's death is described as 'a sweeping fire' (ASCR 345), and in the final chapter of *A Stone Came Rolling* Ishma walks 'as sure as everlasting fire' (ASCR 389). There may not be anything like as many references to fire connected to Ishma as there are to Sonya in *Salome*, but combined with the many other ways Ishma is presented as being an elemental force, the connection between the two women as both being beyond ordinary is very clear. Ishma as an elemental force also echoes the sense of the force referred to in the naturalist writing of authors like Jack London and Frank Norris.

### Ishma's Ambiguous Class Status

There are notable similarities between Fielding Burke and her strong, proud literary creation Ishma. As Wes Mantooth explains, in creating Ishma Burke

creates a protagonist whose subjectivity both intersects and diverges from her own.... By creating a protagonist who can engage with a broader range of class experience than she herself plausibly could, Burke establishes an ideal vantage point for portraying class struggle and tensions she saw as inherent in capitalism across social strata.<sup>78</sup>

Mantooth then insightfully asserts that

Ishma is ... neither middle-class nor "proletarian" ... with regards [*sic*] to her ambiguous relationship to industrial work and industrial workers' interests. Though she works in a mill for a short time, she never experiences the dire poverty of families who can see no way to survive outside of the mill economy.<sup>79</sup>

Ishma is acutely aware of her fortunate but ambiguous position, and it can be seen in a conversation she has with her husband Britt on the subject that she views this position negatively when considered in regard to her labour-organizing efforts:

"We can get out. I mean you and me. We've got Cloudy Knob. We can always go back to the mountains."

"Yes. We've got our farm up there. And that's against us."

"What you mean? It's a mighty good thing we've got it, seems to me."

"So long as we have it, we know we can retreat. We are not logical products of the system. We're accidents. It's merely an accident that we can save ourselves" (ASCR 219).

It must not, however, be forgotten that, unlike Burke, Ishma was raised in dire poverty; it is only through the people she meets and, later, through improvements that Britt is able to make on the farm once Bainie and Jim finally leave that she has some degree of financial security, and even then she never has any amount of excess money.

### Ishma's Use of Language

Another potential similarity between Burke and Ishma is in the language that they use. Burke is a former teacher, the child of two teachers, and her novels

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<sup>78</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 131.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

include some interesting vocabulary and occasional references to historical and classical figures, the knowledge of which requires a degree of education. Ishma is a self-improver. She has always dreamed of what she sees as a better way of living – cleaner and more ordered, particularly with regard to eating meals. As a twelve year old she practises ‘arraying such a table as was in her heart’ (12) by marking it out in the woods with a stick and fern leaves. However, on the issue of language there is a slight sense of snobbishness about the way in which Ishma gets frustrated with members of her family for speaking in their own dialect. The issue does dramatize painfully the tension that is implicit to the idea of ‘rising’: it leads to a sense of alienation, one which Ishma feels and which also links back to the biblical suggestion of her naming meaning ‘an outcast’.

The reader is told at various times of Ishma’s approach to language: ‘Vainly she drilled him [Bainie’s eldest son, Sam] in speech-mending ways according to the rules and examples laid down in his language book’ (8); ‘She tried to improve her speech by reading aloud and accustoming her ears to something different from the lazily uttered, half-finished words and twisted syntax of those about her. She noticed that visitors in the mountains, who sometimes found their way to Cloudy Knob, and commented on the native speech as “quaint,” or “really Shakespearean,” were careful to use nothing resembling it’ (14); ““You be dead tired, I reckon,” her mother said. Ishma accepted the awkward form of speech without a wince, for with her mother “be” was the verb of intimacy and affection’ (20-21). At one point Ishma actually becomes rather angry with her sister for what she perceives as a lazy and almost child-like pronunciation of Jerusalem Oak.

The language used by Burke in these examples, ‘improve her speech’, ‘lazily uttered’, could suggest her viewpoint on this issue, implying the possibility that she believes there is a ‘correct’ and an ‘incorrect’ way to speak, though there is no evidence to prove this. While it is true that speaking words with what a given society deems to be standard pronunciation can help a person rise socially and economically in that society, the suggestion in Burke’s writing of a ‘correct’ and an ‘incorrect’ way of speaking is arguably problematic. Burke believed that socialism or perhaps even communism would provide for a world in which everyone was educated. As Cathy Ackerman asserts, ‘The overwhelming message of Burke’s art is

that education can and must be the *right*, not the privilege, of every individual, whether she grows up in isolated Appalachia, on a reservation, in a city, or in a sprawling suburb.<sup>80</sup> This is obviously a very good message. However, in demonstrating the views she does on the use of language, she is demonstrating a lack of understanding that language develops naturally and that it is about communication between people: if a group of people understand each other, then the language they are using clearly works for them. No one can sensibly tell those people that their language is wrong. Worse still, the notion of correct and incorrect language is somewhat elitist and is promulgated by those in positions of power. It is also used by those in such positions to ensure that less educated people remain 'in their place', so to speak.

While it might be ironic that Burke strives to be revolutionary while at the same time appears to judge people's use of language with the standards of the powerful elite, she could also, through Ishma, be demonstrating a belief that the system is best changed from within, and that as accent and dialect are often used as barriers through which the less educated cannot pass, learning to speak what can be called standard English could help to break down those barriers.

By explaining how the English that we regard as standard came to be so, respected linguist R. L. Trask illuminates its connection to the powerful elite:

How did the choices get made? Who or what determined which forms would become standard and which should be relegated to the outer darkness of non-standard status? Mostly, it was an accident. By the early modern period (the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), regional differences among English-speakers had become so great that people from different parts of England were often finding it genuinely difficult to understand one another.... Some kind of solution had to be found. Unlike the French (and others), the English never saw fit to establish a language academy to hand down rulings from on high. Instead, the problem was solved by political factors. The capital city of London, and the region around it, had become by far the most important region of the country – politically (the court was there, and it was the hub of the legal and administrative systems), economically (it was the centre of commerce and banking), and culturally (the great universities of Oxford and Cambridge were nearby).

This was enough to settle matters. The particular varieties of English used in and around London came increasingly to be regarded as the most prestigious and desirable type of English.... Hence the particular verb forms that we now

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<sup>80</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 205.

regard as standard are, for the most part, no more than those forms that happened to be in use in the London area.<sup>81</sup>

There is no suggestion here that it is bad thing to educate people or to have a form of Standard English for the purpose of ensuring that communication is possible. And of course from one perspective, if everybody on the planet spoke the same dialect of the same language in the same accent it would aid communication between people and might therefore make a world-wide communist revolution easier. However, it would be somewhat dehumanizing because the organic nature of language, in the sense that it has grown and developed naturally, is a very human trait, though this organic nature of language is one that has long been molded, manipulated, and used as an instrument of power.

## **Conclusion**

### **A Comparison between Burke and the Other Authors Being Used in this Thesis**

Fielding Burke shared a close friendship with Rose Pastor Stokes, as did Anzia Yezierska. Stokes was a founding member of the Communist Party USA, and yet neither Burke nor Yezierska ever joined. They were both sympathizers, and while Burke wrote novels directly related to the communist struggle, Yezierska focused more on individuals who rose through their own efforts within the framework of society. But both authors are critical of that framework, and despite the apparent differences in the content of their work, both share a strong Emersonian belief in the individual. While lamenting the social conditions that keep individuals down, they both stress a responsibility on individuals to have the energy and will to help themselves rise up. Burke places more responsibility on the individual than Grace Lumpkin and Myra Page.

The very human inconsistencies displayed by the protagonists of Burke and Yezierska denote a further similarity between the two authors, and they serve to give their writing a more authentic and 'grounded' feel. Sylvia Jenkins Cook defines *Call Home the Heart* as 'by far the best' of the Gastonia novels,<sup>82</sup> and besides the fact of it being well written and at times quite poignant, Cook's statement seems

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<sup>81</sup> R. L. Trask, *Language: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 1997), 173-4.

<sup>82</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 98.

valid because Burke's writing has that sense of authenticity and of being 'believable', even though there are some parts of it that reduce complexities and therefore limit the opportunity for nuanced interpretations. Her effective evocation of mountain life, drawn in a way that highlights realities without romanticizing them, and her powerfully drawn heroine, Ishma, make her two novels of the thirties very important. Burke's strong beliefs about how wrong it was to be merely a middle-class observer of the labour struggle and her efforts to really get to know mountain people help provide the aforementioned sense of authenticity in her work. It is interesting how Burke's work has more in common with Yeziarska's than that of the other authors here does, considering the difference in subject matter. Burke's subject matter has more in common with the other novelists because despite being the only proletarian novelist studied here, Yeziarska did not actually write proletarian novels in the purest sense of the term, even though she did focus on the lives of the poor white working class.

Perhaps the fact that Burke 'considered literary chatting a waste of time'<sup>83</sup> freed her to spend time with the working people about whom she wrote, for her attempt to really understand the thought processes and lives of the poor white working class are evident in her writing, in spite of its faults. And in Ishma she creates one of the great American protagonists, one who demonstrates the American ideals of rising and achieving by means of one's own efforts but one who does so with a desire and a hope to pull the rest of humanity up with her.

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<sup>83</sup> Ackerman, *Heart of Revolution*, 26.



## Chapter Five

### Grace Lumpkin

#### Lumpkin's Life

Grace Lumpkin's exact year of birth is not known for certain, which is an interesting though purely coincidental parallel with Anzia Yezierska. Lumpkin frequently gave the year as 1900 or 1901, but evidence suggests that it was more likely 1892.<sup>1</sup> Further confusion exists about the number of siblings that Lumpkin had: according to Suzanne Sowinska, she was the ninth of eleven children,<sup>2</sup> but Jacquelyn Dowd Hall states that she was sixth of seven.<sup>3</sup> Lumpkin was born in Milledgeville, Georgia to 'a prominent but economically unstable Georgian family.'<sup>4</sup> Further highlighting the lack of clear information regarding Lumpkin's early life, Laura Hapke refers to her as being 'North Carolina born',<sup>5</sup> although most sources concur that Georgia was her place of birth. Around 1900, in an attempt 'to rebuild the family fortune lost during Reconstruction, her father moved the family to Columbia, South Carolina',<sup>6</sup> and despite being outsiders, they adjusted here because of what Grace's sister Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin described as 'three essential southern institutions ... : genealogy, ties to the Confederacy, and religion.'<sup>7</sup> The aristocratic nature of the family's origins is, according to Sowinska, underlined by the fact that 'there was both a town and a county named for them'<sup>8</sup> in Georgia; moreover, once the Lumpkins were in South Carolina, people considered them as being from "'good family'"<sup>9</sup>. William Lumpkin, Grace's father, a Civil War veteran who 'fought with the Confederacy and then rode with the Ku Klux Klan',<sup>10</sup> longed for the Old South and encouraged reverence for the Lost Cause in his children; in

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Sowinska in *To Make My Bread* by Grace Lumpkin [1932] (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), Introduction, Note 4, xxxi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>3</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'Women Writers, the "Southern Front," and the Dialectical Imagination,' *Southern Historical Association* v. 69, no.1 (2003): 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Sowinska, *To Make My Bread*, Introduction, viii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>10</sup> Dowd Hall, 'Women Writers,' 11.

contrast, her mother Annette ‘was born to plain folk and orphaned during the Civil war, then brought up by wealthy relatives in Augusta, Georgia, and given a “splendid education.” She would figure in most histories as the consummate white southern matron, devoted equally to genealogy and to the United Daughters of the Confederacy.’<sup>11</sup>

The obsession that Grace’s father had with the past was sizeable; it was its ‘magnitude’ that Wes Mantooh suggests ‘helped Katherine perceive its incompatibility with reality.’<sup>12</sup> To retain a sense of what William Lumpkin considered to be his place in society, the Episcopalian Lumpkin family joined the ‘socially elite Trinity Church’<sup>13</sup> in Columbia. However, the Lumpkins were simply attempting to maintain appearances, reduced as they were ‘to a succession of small urban homes that all paled in comparison to their childhood plantations’.<sup>14</sup> Later in the Lumpkin children’s childhood ‘this already cracking façade of elitism further crumbled. The family bought and moved to a two-hundred acre farm in the “Sand Hills,” a region of South Carolina with generally poor, sandy soil.’<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, they were significantly richer than their neighbours, and it was in this environment that Grace and her siblings discovered the world of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and the racial divide and tensions between poor whites and blacks on the land. Interestingly, the field work on the Lumpkin farm was done by black workers.<sup>16</sup>

It was from out of this world that, in the autumn of 1924, ‘as the Southern Renaissance gathered force, Grace Lumpkin wrenched herself ... with a plan’,<sup>17</sup> states Dowd Hall. Having already worked for the Young Woman’s Christian Association in France as an emissary during World War I, Grace moved to New York City.

While living in New York City, Lumpkin was published in *New Masses* and, in 1932, released her Gorky Prize-winning novel, *To Make My Bread*. As well as being a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Wes Mantooh, “You Factory Folks Who Sing This Rhyme Will Surely Understand:” *Culture, Ideology, and Action in the Gastonia Novels of Myra Page, Grace Lumpkin, and Olive Dargan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 57.

<sup>13</sup> Sowinska, *To Make My Bread*, Introduction, ix.

<sup>14</sup> Mantooh, *You Factory Folks*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Dowd Hall, ‘Women Writers,’ 3.

writer, Lumpkin is described by Laura Hapke as having been a ‘textile-labor reformer’<sup>18</sup> in this period. Just months before the novel’s publication, Lumpkin married ‘Michael Intrator, a handsome, self-educated, Jewish immigrant and a battling member of the Fur and Leather Workers, perhaps the most militant trade union in New York.’<sup>19</sup> The marriage ended in 1941, not before Grace had undergone an abortion, an act that, according to Sowinska, she regretted. For many years after this Lumpkin lived ‘hand-to-mouth’.<sup>20</sup> She wrote that “writing is a pain. It is also the most satisfying joy.... And besides I need ... to make some money”;<sup>21</sup> Dowd Hall adds that Lumpkin’s ‘life, virtually until her death in 1980, was punctuated by these refrains.’<sup>22</sup> She points also to the fact that ‘Grace Lumpkin wrote very much from the margins, and that marginality intensified as the years went by’;<sup>23</sup> ‘in life,’ she elaborates, Lumpkin ‘found herself squeezed between the metropolitan left’s suspicion of the provinces and the conservatives’ proprietary romanticization. Turning to the right in the 1940s, she began to see her earlier radicalism as a rejection of the South (figured as the white, conservative South) and to portray her younger self as deluded and naïve.’<sup>24</sup> There is a definite suggestion in Lumpkin’s writing that this turn to the right actually began in the 1930s, a point that will be discussed later in this chapter.

With her willing and active participation in the Senate Sub-Committee on Government Operations in 1953, Grace Lumpkin’s rejection of communism, and the Left in general, was complete. Sowinska states that ‘Lumpkin got what she wanted from the subcommittee, and the subcommittee got all that it wanted from Lumpkin’,<sup>25</sup> and she asks in her Introduction to the 1995 reprinting of *To Make My Bread*, ‘How could the writer of *To Make My Bread* ... have become so aggressively reactionary twenty years later? What caused the winner of the 1932 Maxim Gorky Award for best labor novel to give up radicalism and turn instead to religion?’<sup>26</sup> One

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<sup>18</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Dowd Hall, ‘Women Writers,’ 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Sowinska, *To Make My Bread*, Introduction, xx.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

possible answer is offered by Dowd Hall: ‘the border crossings Grace Lumpkin attempted lifted her into history, but in the end they took a tremendous toll. She leaped from the provinces to New York City, then crossed back and forth, using the South’s ballads and battles to forward the goals of the Southern Front. She tried to move freely – dialectically – between literature and politics, past and present, tradition and change in a world where binary thinking – the tendency to force experience into either/or oppositions – still exerted a powerful pull.’<sup>27</sup>

In attempting to answer her own question about Lumpkin’s change of beliefs, Sowinska suggests that ‘the resolution of these contradictions lies partly in Lumpkin’s southern agrarian and Christian roots and partly in her experiences of radicalism in the 1930s’.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps there is also some truth in the notion that people given to joining extreme causes are likely to lurch between extremes rather than keeping to a moderate view: John Dos Passos and Frank Norris are but two famous literary examples. Or perhaps it is true that, as Dowd Hall says, there is a toll taken from those who cross too many ideological and emotional borders. As an example, Emma Goldman was roundly denounced for her change of heart with regard to supporting Russian Bolshevism and was ignored when she sounded warning of the Russian regime’s totalitarian nature. The tightly-controlled, top-down power structure of the CPUSA echoed Russian communism under Stalin, at least in Lumpkin’s view. By the mid-1930s, Lumpkin was beginning to have strong doubts about the methods certain factions of the Party were willing to use to achieve their political goals. She was also becoming increasingly concerned about CP discipline. In her 1953 testimony before the Senate Sub-Committee on Government Operations, she complained that Joshua Kunitz, then editor of *The New Masses*, had in 1934 threatened to ruin her career as a writer if her upcoming novel, *A Sign for Cain*, had anything against the Party line in it.<sup>29</sup> If true, such oppression, combined with a tendency towards the extreme that may have been a factor in some instances of middle-class American writers engaging with the extreme Left, goes some way to explaining why Lumpkin turned so vehemently against

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<sup>27</sup> Dowd Hall, ‘Women Writers,’ 36-7.

<sup>28</sup> Sowinska, *To Make My Bread*, Introduction, viii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

communism and was pleased for the opportunity to testify against her former comrades. On the other hand, Walter Rideout points out that ‘one would find her charge of coercion [regarding *A Sign for Cain*] more compelling if she had not already, apparently on her own initiative, “written communist propaganda into *To Make My Bread*, published in 1932.”’<sup>30</sup>

Jacqueline Dowd Hall explains that in 1963, ‘simultaneously demonizing and drowning in her radical past, Lumpkin returned to the South’, but ‘not to Georgia, where she was born, nor to South Carolina, where she grew up and where her family still lived, but to a ramshackle farmhouse near King and Queen Courthouse, Virginia, where she settled among the ghosts of the first families to arrive in the Old Dominion and near the grave of the first Lumpkin to arrive in the New World.’<sup>31</sup> And in a move that completed Lumpkin’s sea change in attitude, she ‘supported the resistance to school desegregation’;<sup>32</sup> moreover, once she ‘had completed [what she called] the “long, slow, painful journey toward willingness to stand up and be counted on the side of eternal laws,” she never again spoke positively about her first novel, *To Make My Bread*, or of the radical culture out of which it was born.’<sup>33</sup> After living several years in Virginia, Lumpkin did move back to Columbia, South Carolina, where ‘in the years following her testimony, lectures and writing became her final acts of witnessing’,<sup>34</sup> and she continued undertaking these activities until her death in 1980.

### **Lumpkin’s Shifting Perspective**

#### **Analysis focused on *The Wedding* and *Full Circle***

Lumpkin’s final novel *Full Circle* (1962) has been given little critical attention. Although its publication falls outside the interwar years being studied in this thesis, some consideration of this work is important in the context of studying Grace Lumpkin because the novel provides an interesting insight into her Communist-to-Christian conversion. Referring to the character of Caroline Gault in Lumpkin’s

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<sup>30</sup> Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* [1956] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), note 1, 311.

<sup>31</sup> Dowd Hall, ‘Women Writers’, 36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Sowinska, *To Make My Bread*, Introduction, xxi.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xx-xxi.

second novel *A Sign for Cain* (1935), Wes Mantoath points out that ‘ironically, in the decades following the publication of *Cain*, Lumpkin herself would adopt an apolitical perspective toward art reminiscent of that satirically voiced in the fictional Caroline Gault’s comment’ “‘What have I to do with class struggles? The class I belong to is fixed, a class of cultured people all over the world. I am above struggles.’”<sup>35</sup> Mantoath sees the 1939 publication of *The Wedding* as evidence of Lumpkin’s shifting political viewpoint, and he explains that a 1951 ‘manuscript for a play entitled “Remember Now” illustrates Lumpkin’s complete rejection of her earlier novels’ insistence that communist society would give individuals greater freedom for self-realization.<sup>36</sup> *The Wedding*, Lumpkin’s third novel, does indicate that this shift in Lumpkin’s perspective was well underway by the late 1930s, if not before. It is not a proletarian novel, though like *A Sign for Cain* it has in places an autobiographical feel, with this early description of the character Robert Middleton an example:

He became one of that large group of Southerners who had many traditions behind them, but no promise for the future. Some of these men accepted their life and enjoyed it in a quiet simple manner. Others were continually disturbed by the contrast between their traditions of comparative grandeur and the present reality. Robert Middleton felt the bitterness of his meagre salary and his lost independence.<sup>37</sup>

Robert Middleton is treated sympathetically by Lumpkin throughout the novel, presented as a strong, righteous man who acts out of a sense of moral purpose. He fears changes to the town in which he lives, stating to the Bishop: “‘Suppose our population becomes more than a quarter of a million and we bring new business to our city. What will it profit us if we lose our souls?’”<sup>38</sup> He later questions the morals behind the town’s and the church’s new money, suggesting that it comes “‘from the whores to God, whores and cotton mills’”.<sup>39</sup> This is a belief that he feels is confirmed shortly before the wedding, when he speaks honestly to Doctor Grant: “‘Now I know you belong with those men who take their money from whores and give it to the church. And I will have nothing to do with you. If you go

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<sup>35</sup> Mantoath, *You Factory Folks*, 115.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Grace Lumpkin, *The Wedding* [1939] (New York: Popular Library, 1977), 16.

<sup>38</sup> Lumpkin, *The Wedding*, 166.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

into that chancel I will never enter this church again. I will not countenance such hypocrisy.”<sup>40</sup> The bishop supports Robert, emphasising Lumpkin’s presentation of Robert as what could be termed ‘the good guy’ and adding to a sense that she presents her own views through him. Analysis of his thoughts and opinions shows that Robert is clearly evoking the idea that the old South was somehow better and that change is a threat. Another suggestion of Lumpkin’s changing views is found in the fatalistic character of Doctor Greve: ‘He could never force an issue, no more than the mountains where he was born could force the seasons to come on them. He waited[,] ... feeling that things would turn out one way or another, and that they must turn out that way whether he did anything about them or not’.<sup>41</sup> In a letter written in 1971 to Kenneth Toombs, the Director of Libraries at the University of South Carolina, Lumpkin posits a development upon her fictional Doctor’s views: ‘there is only one conclusion: The World cannot be saved. There is no utopia. Human nature is human nature and there are only two eternal verities: God’s nature and Human nature – and these will never change, and they never have changed.’<sup>42</sup>

Close reading of *A Sign for Cain* suggests that the shift in Lumpkin’s views may have already begun by the time of that novel’s writing. Her portrayal of the Colonel is not wholly unsympathetic in spite of his unpalatable opinions. He is presented as a man of great honour who has a greater amount of generosity and kindness than other men of his standing. Such a portrayal is strengthened by the presence of a character like Nancy; she appears to hold the Colonel in very high regard and is contented with the status quo in relation to race relations. The suggestion that the novel may not be as radical as it first appears is further supported by the fact that the criminal whom Caroline chooses to protect is more than simply a member of her social class: he is her brother, which adds a level of complexity to her decision and negates to some extent Bill Duncan’s accusation that by shielding him she is simply closing ranks with her class. Perhaps slightly more tenuous as evidence of Lumpkin’s views, though still worthy of note, is the fact of Bill Duncan’s relatively safe position, protected as he is somewhat by his class: he

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>42</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 116.

does not risk everything for the cause in which he believes. These factors combine to produce a novel far less clear cut in its politics than *To Make My Bread*. Wes Mantooth reveals evidence from Lumpkin that supports this idea, and although he is referring to ‘the decades following the publication of *Cain*’, his point that Lumpkin’s ‘recollections in a short 1977 essay [that] suggest that she became unable to continue writing from a class perspective so unlike her own’<sup>43</sup> could be true of the time that she was writing her second novel.

Mother and daughter Ann and Arnie, the main characters in *Full Circle*, are, according to Sowinska, based on two real-life characters from the Scottsboro case, which is itself alluded to in the novel. However, the novel reads almost like an autobiography, tracing as it does the life of a middle-class Christian woman as she moves from her home in the South to New York City, becomes an active communist, and then returns to the South and re-embraces the religion of her youth. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall states that Lumpkin ‘imagined this turn as a *return* – a homecoming to the South and to conservative Christianity.’ Dowd Hall points out, however, that ‘the world to which she [Lumpkin] returned was not the complex world that formed her. It was a world of her own imagining, one whose meanings were “inescapably contemporary,” a product as much of the rise of the New Criticism, anticommunism and massive resistance as of her earlier dreams and experiences.’<sup>44</sup>

Lumpkin’s portrayal of the Communist Party in *Full Circle* is no more or less believable than any propagandist portrayal of the Party in literature because the true finer workings of an organisation are difficult to ascertain with any certainty. History can attempt to do so, but it can be subjective and it has limitations: there will always be gaps in archival information; fiction, however, may be able to fill the spaces of such gaps through imaginative narratives. A number of the texts studied here, including *Full Circle*, narrow down potential complexities, which compromises their search for an understanding of the human reactions and emotions and arguably, therefore, reduces their literary value. Yet as was discussed in Chapter Two, the complexity surrounding the question of whether a piece of writing can be defined as having literary value or being propaganda is such that a definitive answer

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>44</sup> Dowd Hall, ‘Women Writers,’ 36.



is impossible; moreover, searching for such an answer misses the point: the two do not have to be exclusive of each other: good art might serve as the best model for effective propaganda. *Full Circle*, however, lacks any serious amount of literary merit: its biases cannot be defended on the grounds that it is a detailed study of its characters because it lacks exploration into the minds of those characters to truly feel like a detailed study of any kind.

Lumpkin's attack on communism in the novel is often obvious and potentially misinformed. She twice uses the 'glass of water theory', which suggests that in a communist society the satisfaction of sexual desire will be like drinking a glass of water, to attack the communist position on sexual morals, but she wrongly attributes it to Lenin when in fact he spoke against this idea.<sup>45</sup> However, at other times her attack is subtle and insightful. She points to hypocritical language use in a scene in which Ann uses the word cell:

“Don't call it a cell,” Rose admonished. She was always “up” on new words to be used and every new slogan, and in spite of her lack of respect for bourgeois convention, within the Party she insisted that everyone else, as well as herself, be rigidly correct and conventional about these.<sup>46</sup>

There are other examples of Lumpkin analysing the Communist position in a thought-provoking manner. She uses the story of Sol Auer, the laundryman, to highlight the violent intimidation used by unions in their undemocratic push for closed shops. Such incidents are often ignored by left-wing authors, who tend to focus on the brutality practised by the authorities against organized labour, while right-wing authors often overlook such violence and focus instead on what Lumpkin has here: violent union intimidation. In a way, Lumpkin has moved 'full circle' in this respect because in *To Make My Bread* she highlighted the violent response that Gastonia strikers faced. However, in the novel *Full Circle*, she does not dwell on the issue, a fact that could suggest that such intimidation tactics by unions were not commonplace, particularly given that Lumpkin voices her vehement rejection of her former beliefs throughout the book and is unafraid of painting the Communist Party in a negative light. It is, of course, only a suggestion: precisely how much violent or

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm> 17 July 2014  
<http://www.mcg-j.org/english/e-theory/lenin/Lenin-4.html> (accessed 17 July 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Grace Lumpkin, *Full Circle* (Boston and Los Angeles: Western Islands, 1962), 63.

threat-of-being-violent intimidation occurred on both sides of the labour struggle can never be known, for it would require a record of every person who ever felt intimidated or who was ever attacked, and such accounts would also require some form of verification. Moreover, what constitutes intimidation would need to be defined, and the differing personalities of individuals would have to be taken into account, for what intimidates one person might not bother another.

Despite the clear rhetoric of *Full Circle*, there are moments in the novel that do seek to explore multiple viewpoints. In Chapter XVIII, the behaviour and words of both Art and Julie are repugnant: Art performs a symbolic hanging on a model of the baby Jesus, and Julie angrily labels Arnie 'a whore'.<sup>47</sup> These incidents leave the reader with a sense that a moderate, tolerant viewpoint is to be celebrated above all; however, moments such as these are rare, and a one-dimensional view dominates the book. Yet in spite of this, if the autobiographical aspects of the novel truly are related to Lumpkin's thoughts then the book could be read as an extremely useful insight into the mind of an author who had previously written such powerful left-wing novels which, although at times clearly propagandist, explored the human condition in far greater detail than *Full Circle* ever attempts to do.<sup>48</sup> This is particularly true of *To Make My Bread*, which does demonstrate some character development, even though the conversion of John and Bonnie is not explored in the same detail as Ishma's conversion in *Call Home the Heart*. In *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin also explores the protagonists' lives in the mountains before they came to work in the mill town, and this facet of the novel adds to its depth. In comparison, *Full Circle* feels something like Myra Page's *Gathering Storm* in its unashamedly one-sided viewpoint and its unashamedly one-dimensional characters, although this comparison is somewhat unfair on the Myra Page novel, which is more nuanced than this statement suggests.

If *Full Circle* is read as semi-autobiographical fiction, it does to an extent answer Sowinska's question about how and perhaps why Grace Lumpkin moved between political extremes. Throughout the novel, the main character, Ann

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<sup>47</sup> Lumpkin, *Full Circle*, 153.

<sup>48</sup> The point that it 'could be' read this way is important: as the New Critics among others point out, one cannot really ever know the mind of an author.

Braxton, is portrayed as being innocent and naïve; she believes in a fairer, better world than the one in which she lives but she seems to resist the potentially unpalatable ways in which that new world might be achieved. Early in the novel, Ann is discussing with her daughter Arnie the morals and behaviour of certain members of the Party whom Ann describes as being ‘like boys who have an overwhelming desire for adventure, and will irresponsibly dare each other to shoot a gun, or fight a duel with loaded weapons’.<sup>49</sup> Ann tells Arnie: ‘We should be better than they. We are changing the world and making new people.’ Ann’s belief is primarily in people; the political system appears secondary to her. Her daughter’s repost is direct: ‘People won’t change, Mama, until we have changed the whole world. We have inherited all the capitalist faults and evils. You can’t expect any real change until the whole environment is changed.’<sup>50</sup> This echoes a quote of Karl Marx: ‘Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.’<sup>51</sup> Not for the only time in the novel, Ann meets her daughter’s revolutionary response with an accepting silence.

Ann is a lost soul who, having been abandoned by her husband, loses her religious faith and replaces it with a belief in communism, a belief into which she is led and a belief which is itself shattered when her daughter is expelled from the Party and suffers a nervous breakdown, partly as a result of this expulsion. Ann eventually rediscovers her religious faith back at her home in the South, where she has taken Arnie as a way of aiding her daughter’s rehabilitation. At the novel’s conclusion Ann forgives her adulterous husband after he returns to her, Arnie recovers, and life returns to how it once had been, thus completing the *imagined* ‘full circle’. It is not though, in fact, a true full circle, as Dowd Hall has pointed out.<sup>52</sup>

Ann, like Lumpkin, clearly feels that her foray into communism was a terrible mistake from which she was saved by her return to religion. There are even suggestions even in *To Make My Bread* that Lumpkin never had fully renounced her faith, although such analysis might be delving into the regions of supposition. Such

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<sup>49</sup> Lumpkin, *Full Circle*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Thesis on Feuerbach’, 11. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/> (accessed on 30 November 2015).

<sup>52</sup> See footnote 41.

evidence is not found in the extent to which religion features in the novel, for this is a necessity when trying to accurately portray the lives of Appalachian mountain folk; it is found in Lumpkin's use of language and the amount of religious imagery that features in the work. A particular example is her use of the word 'heavens' for 'sky': 'The heavens were open and immense: even the mill that was so huge in the daytime looked flat and insignificant'.<sup>53</sup> While impossible to prove for certain, the zeal with which Lumpkin returned to her faith adds to this suggestion that it was a faith which she had never truly lost.

### **Lumpkin's 1930s Proletarian Novels**

#### **A Sign for Cain**

Discussing Grace Lumpkin's sister Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin's book *The Making of a Southerner*, Jacqueline Dowd Hall explains that 'whether they looked back in pride, anger, or sorrow, most white southerners who committed themselves to print shared a belief in the region's categorical 'difference' from the rest of the country.'<sup>54</sup> Grace Lumpkin focuses on this 'difference' in her 1935 novel *A Sign for Cain*, which explores Communist attempts to organise labour in the South. Sylvia Jenkins Cook states that 'the reaction of reviewers to *A Sign for Cain* was remarkably consistent: they hailed it as fine propaganda but noted its weaknesses as a novel.'<sup>55</sup> According to Wes Mantooh, the novel 'unites the explorations of working-class and upper-middle-class existence that were separated in *To Make My Bread...* [and] shows how the Communist Party's attempt to start a racially integrated sharecroppers union in an unspecified Southern locale affects characters from diverse social and ideological backgrounds'.<sup>56</sup> In doing so, Lumpkin touches upon a number of other Southern issues: race is foremost among these, but the Civil War, Reconstruction, and people's inertia are also considered. The novel weaves its story around the well-documented difficulty that communists and other left-wing groups

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<sup>53</sup> Grace Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread* [1932] (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 281. Subsequent references in parenthesis are to this edition.

<sup>54</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'Open Secrets: Memory, Imagination, and the Refashioning of Southern Identity,' in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 428.

<sup>55</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 117.

<sup>56</sup> Mantooh, *You Factory Folks*, 114.

encountered when attempting to organise in the South. It is a literary explanation of what Dowd Hall terms ‘the “historiography” of the South [which] remains a story of limits – a story of racism, of white male demagoguery, and of ugly election politics.’<sup>57</sup> *A Sign for Cain* explores all three of these ‘limits’, while also analyzing ‘the pervasiveness of what W. J. Cash termed the South’s “savage ideal” – the mix of individualism, machismo, and violence that drew southern white men together, trumping any possibility of class action or cross-race solidarity.’<sup>58</sup> This ‘savage ideal’ explains why it was difficult to unionize in the South, and *A Sign for Cain* explores this difficulty, too, delving into the detail of Cash’s topics, and, like *Full Circle*, reading at times semi-autobiographically.

Dowd Hall’s ‘ugly election politics’ are brought to the fore near the beginning of *A Sign for Cain* when Colonel Gault recalls the time that his political enemy Judson Gardner ‘tried to murder’ him.<sup>59</sup> The Colonel is also a vehicle through which ‘white male demagoguery’ is highlighted. He is a renowned public speaker who passionately defends the values and beliefs of the old South; as a boy of seventeen, he had helped the Governor ‘drive the carpet-baggers from the state’.<sup>60</sup> He is a man who believes absolutely in the racial divide between black and white, defending it in both words and actions through his paternalism: “‘Learn any new-fangled notions up North?’” he asks Denis, his black servant before continuing without waiting for Denis to answer: “‘I’m glad you’ve come back.... The North is no place for colored people. Your best friends are right here. I suppose you found that out’”.<sup>61</sup> The juxtaposition of the Colonel’s and Denis’s social positions is then made painfully clear when, still without truly engaging with Denis, the Colonel concludes: “‘You can come up and shave me in half an hour’”.<sup>62</sup> There is no hint of irony from the Colonel, but Lumpkin’s point here is clear: in instructing Denis to shave him, the Colonel sounds as if he is granting some kind of favour, some special permission for which Denis ought to be grateful. This exchange effectively encapsulates the Colonel’s viewpoint, which is in turn intended to represent the views of many white men and

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<sup>57</sup> Dowd Hall, ‘Open Secrets,’ 434.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Grace Lumpkin, *A Sign for Cain* (New York: Lee Furman, 1935), 13.

<sup>60</sup> Lumpkin, *A Sign for Cain*, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

women in the South. Such a position is further expounded by the Colonel when he states: “I am not afraid of nigras. They are children. The people who ruined the South ... were the carpet baggers who settled here ... [and] made of the South a commercial, money-grabbing, money-mad place”.<sup>63</sup>

Yet, as mentioned earlier, in spite of the Colonel’s unpalatable opinions and prejudices, Lumpkin does not draw him in a wholly unsympathetic manner. He is held in high esteem by Nancy, Denis’s mother, and he is shocked when he discovers how much Jim has been neglecting the workers on his land; and he shows at least a small amount of kindness and offers some level of protection to Denis, which is in stark contrast to the treatment of black characters by working-class white characters such as the sheriff and his deputies. This is in no way to suggest that Lumpkin’s writing itself suggests any sympathy towards his opinions. Even though she paints him as a character caught out of time by a world that is changing around him, there is ultimately a sense that his dying might represent the death of the old South, and that this would offer the opportunity for a fairer and less prejudiced future; such hope is, however, short lived when drawn against the younger Gaults’ closing ranks at the novel’s conclusion. On the surface, Lumpkin makes further attempts to present a balanced argument about communism through the relationship between the arguably semi-autobiographical Caroline Gault and Bill Duncan. These two lovers discuss political and ideological issues, though there is never a developed dialogue between them on such issues. Caroline is the person who, in protecting her brother, Jim, effectively condemns Denis and Ficens to death, but before he fully realises this awful fact, Bill, still believing that she will help them, defends her to his friend Walt. In doing so, he makes the admission that “our belief ... is one sided, all on one side”.<sup>64</sup>

In avoiding a completely one-dimensional portrayal of the Colonel, or of Denis, whose emotions towards his mother are torn in a way with which many people in his position would feel empathy, Lumpkin moves the novel away from having the feeling of being blunt propaganda and gives it a sense of being a work of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 300.

literature that is attempting to uncover multilayered realities, even if it does so rather unsuccessfully.

*A Sign for Cain* certainly does portray a South dominated by Cash's 'savage ideal'. White men of all classes are shown to unite in their at-times violent racism, which hinders attempts to form class solidarity or closer cross-race interaction. Sowinska notes that 'there are no large-scale union battles being fought in ... [the] novel. The focus is on the everyday, basic, and often minor struggles the radicals face when attempting to bring about social reform,<sup>65</sup> and Lumpkin is clear about the fate of vulnerable communists like Denis and the brutal manner in which they will be silenced. Her fiction also reflects a material reality: faced with the type of situation found in *A Sign for Cain*, the ruling class will often close ranks and protect itself. Yet the novel offers a faint hope of a better future, particularly in its suggestion that in spite of the 'savage ideal' that dominates, there could be solidarity across racial lines. Bill Duncan is not the only white man in the town who is willing to stand against the racist majority: Lee Foster is a working-class white man who works hard to rise above the racism that he says 'I been taught',<sup>66</sup> and his actions prove that he succeeds.

The novel does not end on the same defiant, upbeat note that concludes the more famous *To Make My Bread*, but its attempt to range across many issues and understand more than just one point of view make it a novel worthy of study, albeit one with many flaws. Sylvia Jenkins Cook records her thoughts about the book, stating that *A Sign for Cain*, 'reportedly written under Communist party coercion, makes a considerable effort to correct the imbalance of feeling and thought in ... [*To Make My Bread*] by having as its hero a middle-class radical newspaper editor. However, in spite of the preponderance of philosophical viewpoints represented, the novel still permits personality and emotion, instead of ideology, to shape its political responses.'<sup>67</sup> Having said this, she is critical of the lack of 'tension' in the

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<sup>65</sup> Susan Sowinska, "Writing Across the Color Line: White Women Writers and the "Negro Question" in the Gastonia Novels," in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 134.

<sup>66</sup> Lumpkin, *A Sign for Cain*, 233.

<sup>67</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 115.

'central debate between the lovers Bill Duncan and Caroline Gault'.<sup>68</sup> However, building in her point about personality and emotion, she accuses the novel of having a sense of 'literary contrivance rather than intellectual conviction',<sup>69</sup> suggesting that Lumpkin uses the 'sensationalism' of the novel's numerous horrific episodes 'to produce the correct responses' but fails to make 'much effort at analysis.'<sup>70</sup> It is because of this that Jenkins Cook accuses Lumpkin of using 'transparent devices'<sup>71</sup> that may fail to convince the reader. Furthermore, she indicates that, while the truth of the 'the most horrible incidents' of Southern brutality found in the novel can be easily be verified,<sup>72</sup> 'there is a distortion, a ripping out of context in this kind of selective portrayal of southern horror – a distortion that refuses to admit the aesthetic rules of the gothic but nevertheless wishes to capitalize on its terrifying effects.'<sup>73</sup> Jenkins Cook concludes that 'Grace Lumpkin's lurid South in *A Sign for Cain* tends to give some credibility to Leslie Fielder's theory that the one thing literary radicals feared in the thirties was the failure of fear itself; so they cherished horror as a counterthreat to the official optimism and limited reforms of the New Deal.'<sup>74</sup>

### **To Make My Bread**

The ultimate action in *To Make My Bread*, Grace Lumpkin's first and best novel, focuses on the Gastonia textile mill strike of 1929, though Joseph Urgo believes that the novel 'is chiefly concerned with the effects on women of the transition from mountain to mill life'.<sup>75</sup> It was, according to Sylvia Jenkins Cook, the Gastonia novel that 'received the most uniformly favorable reviews.'<sup>76</sup> Richard Gray expands on the links between certain Gastonia novels: 'Centered on one mountain family called the McClures, Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* is connected with two

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 117-8.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>75</sup> Joseph R. Urgo, "Proletarian Literature and Feminism: The Gastonia Novels and Feminist Protest," *The Minnesota Review* v. 24, no. 2 (1985);, 71.

<sup>76</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 110.



other Gastonia novels, in particular, Burke's *Call Home the Heart* and Page's *Gathering Storm*, in the sense that it focuses on the experience of mountain women as they struggle to reconcile their traditional status as matriarchal keepers of the house with new demands made on them by an oppressive system of wage labor and the poverty and deprivation attendant upon it.<sup>77</sup> Sharing strong structural similarities with *Call Home the Heart* in particular, much of the content of *To Make My Bread* is concerned with events in its protagonists' lives before the strike actually takes place. Barbara Foley believes that Lumpkin 'structures ... *To Make My Bread* as the bildungsroman of Bonnie McLure';<sup>78</sup> the same could be said of *Call Home the Heart* and Ishma, and of Tom and Marge in *Gathering Storm*.

Despite the centrality of gender as a theme in the novel, it explores other important areas as well, most notably the class struggle. Wes Mantooth states that 'in a sense, *To Make My Bread* takes Katherine's [Grace's sister] insight – that "non-slave-holding was the standpoint from which the vast majority of Southern whites had necessarily looked on the world" – and focuses its implications on a particular facet of Southern working-class experience. In the modern South, this non-slaveholding/slaveholding distinction likely continued to divide the South between the working-class and those who profited from their labor.'<sup>79</sup> An analysis of this division is central to Lumpkin's novel. She also explores the role of religion in the life of poor mountain people, and although issues surrounding race do not play quite as important a part as they do in Myra Page's *Gathering Storm*, or even Burke's novels, they are nonetheless present and relevant, while violence, created both by people and by the natural world, is a recurring theme that underpins much of what occurs in the book. These elements are also all present in Burke's *Call Home the Heart*, and there are many similarities between the two novels. However, Sylvia Jenkins Cook finds a crucial difference in the differing scopes of the two works:

By contrast with the broad philosophic scope of Fielding Burke's novels, Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* appears to be on a rather minor scale.... It is

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<sup>77</sup> Richard Gray, 'A Southern Writer and Class War in the Mountains: Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*,' in *Reading Southern Poverty Between the Wars, 1918-1939*, ed. Richard Godden and Martin Crawford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 181.

<sup>78</sup> Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 233.

<sup>79</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 60.

closest to Rideout's stereotype of "local color fiction done with a radical purpose," and as such, appears to have offended few with its ideology and touched many with its compassion for bewildered peasants, uprooted from their centuries-old mountain life and thrust into monstrous factories that grind them down to make bread for the wealthy. Both the successes and failures of this novel can be traced directly to the conventions of its genre: it is most effective in using the traditional gulf between rural expectations and urban reality to produce a fine sense of moral irony, but this tends to be exploited for pity rather than as a prelude to rational action.<sup>80</sup>

Jenkins Cook takes issue with what she sees as the limited scope of *To Make My Bread*, a point with which many critics concur, but her assessment of Lumpkin's use of moral irony to elicit pity not action could be questioned. The clear, simple focus of *To Make My Bread*, albeit more obviously propagandist than *Call Home the Heart*, can be seen as adding strength to the novel's message and is as likely to galvanize a reader into action as it is to cause pity. Moreover, the 'peasants' to whom Jenkins Cook refers are very much planning to continue their actions at the novel's close, with no suggestion that they want pity. Granted, Jenkins Cook is referring to the response of the reader, and she does later refer to the 'emotional note' of the conclusion being 'correct';<sup>81</sup> but as just stated the reader's reaction is as likely to be anger as it is pity, and while Jenkins Cook believes that 'pity ... is not a constructive tool of communism',<sup>82</sup> a focused anger might well be an extremely useful tool.

The conclusion of *To Make My Bread* can be read different ways. One of the final scenes is the funeral of Bonnie, who represents the real-life Gastonia striker and ballad writer/singer Ella May Wiggins, and this denouement could suggest a sense of failure. But the final lines of the novel predict a revolutionary future: "I was feeling," John said, "as if everything was finished." "No," John Stevens said. "This is just the beginning" (284).

*To Make My Bread* could be said to be a touch simplistic in its easy labelling of 'rich and poor', and while the novel does explore the lives of the poor, they are arguably portrayed somewhat as one-dimensional characters in a one-dimensional community. This is not, though, entirely fair: Richard Gray makes an important connection which will be discussed later between religion and the behaviour of the

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<sup>80</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 110.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

workers during the strike. By comparison, Fielding Burke explores the lives of mountain folk far more convincingly, and in *A Stone Came Rolling* attempts to understand the position of the middle and upper-middle classes of mill towns. Yet the fact that Lumpkin avoids deep political analysis suggests that it was never her intention; some form of propaganda probably was, although the earlier discussion about Lumpkin's shifting perspectives calls into question just how true this might be. At the time of its publishing there was critical debate over just how propagandist *To Make My Bread* was: even Robert Cantwell, welcoming the novel as “proof that there is such a thing as proletarian literature”, called it “propagandist”, while conversely the *New York Times* stated that it was “not in any way propagandist.”<sup>83</sup> The novel's structure is similar to that of *Call Home the Heart* in that a considerable portion of the writing is set in the mountains, with the latter parts of the book being based in the mill town. Yet the fact that, *New York Times* aside, most critics did comment upon the propagandist elements of *To Make My Bread* brings it closer in comparative terms to Myra Page's *Gathering Storm*.

Not everyone agrees with the assessment of *To Make My Bread* as having revolutionary intent. Barbary Foley explains that ‘in his review of *To Make My Bread*, Moishe Nadir faulted Lumpkin for writing “for the most part not from her present point of view as a revolutionist, but from the point of view of the backward workers she is describing.”’<sup>84</sup> This derogatory description of the very workers that left-wing writers and critics like Nadir were supposed to be supporting could provide an anecdotal clue to one of the reasons that communism never made any serious inroads into mainstream American society – but only if Nadir was not alone in his viewpoint, whereas in fact, other left-wing writers and critics have criticized Nadir: Paula Rabinowitz describes his contribution to the 1935 American Writers' Congress as ‘Stalinist diatribe’.<sup>85</sup> Nadir has also missed Lumpkin's point: it is rather obvious that she did indeed intend to write from the workers' perspective, and while Jenkins Cook's point about lack of political depth is valid, it is just that lack of depth that makes the propagandist element *To Make My Bread* so powerful. The characters in

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<sup>83</sup> Urgo, ‘Proletarian Literature,’ 71.

<sup>84</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 113.

<sup>85</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 24.

the novel are developed just enough to make a reader care, and this evokes emotion and therefore rallies that reader to the workers' cause. Jenkins Cook concurs with this point, but does also question the effectiveness of what she calls 'Lumpkin's technique of entering completely into the perspective of the uneducated poor': 'it is moving and effective in eliciting the maximum compassion for them, but it also leaves the novel without a figure, either fictional or real (in the persona of the author), who can articulate the Marxist solution.'<sup>86</sup>

It might stand to reason that the deeper the analysis of characters in a novel, the more subtle the nuances, the more a reader will become involved with a story. However, as stated there is just enough such development in *To Make My Bread*, and whether the reader's response is pity or anger, it is likely to make him or her at least temporarily sympathetic to the workers' cause. Richard Gray adds to this debate when he asserts that 'the achievement of the novel does not really lie in its material portrait of life in the mill town, stark and powerful though that portrait is, but elsewhere: in the carefully graduated account of the different responses among the hill folk to the new forms of labor and affliction.'<sup>87</sup> It is probable, though not certain, that these responses are what a reader will react to, and with enough of what Gray calls a 'graduated account' to qualify the novel as a work of artistic merit, *To Make My Bread* appears to walk that unquantifiable and invisible line between propaganda and art.

#### Gender in *To Make My Bread*

*To Make My Bread* differs from Burke's *Call Home the Heart* and Page's *Gathering Storm* in that in those other two novels, 'the female protagonist's close childhood relationship with a class-conscious grandmother develops her later capacities for political activism.'<sup>88</sup> Foley inaccurately includes *To Make My Bread* in this statement, but the error highlights the point effectively. Bonnie, described when a child as 'always wanting to run around like boys' (24) by Emma, learns her

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Gray, 'A Southern Writer,' 183.

<sup>88</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 237.

activism from the defiance of her grandfather and from the strength of her mother, who is a powerful though ultimately not feminist figure.

Laura Hapke refers to Sylvia Jenkins Cook's analysis of the 'dual heroes in the persons John and Bonnie McClure'<sup>89</sup> when explaining that Lumpkin 'attempts to meld the male and female experience of the strike'.<sup>90</sup> Hapke believes that

Bonnie is so dedicated to a communal culture, to family, that it is only in the last fifty pages that ... she emerges in the set piece favored by all but Burke, to take the podium and sing the Wiggins song. Lumpkin ... relies on the Wiggins legend and a cast of faceless supporting characters (or stereotyped ones?) to symbolize the female involvement in Gastonia. But ... male energies open and close the narrative.<sup>91</sup>

Hapke's point supports Jenkins Cook's assertion that *To Make My Bread* is too simplistic and relies too heavily on emotion, at least in its use of what she calls 'the Wiggins legend' and its eliciting of pity from the reader. Emotion is not usually associated with 'male' traits, though, and there is much evidence within the book to explain the cultural reasons for why 'male energies' might open and close the narrative, even if this runs counter to any feminist themes in the work. Lumpkin's novels are, in fact, far less feminist in their approach than those of Burke, and one cannot help but feel that Lumpkin towed the masculine Communist Party line rather more closely than her contemporary.

Gender relations between the white, poor Appalachian farmers portrayed in *To Make My Bread* are a central theme from the very beginning, and they all point to a society divided along gender lines, with patriarchy very much the norm. Part of this sense is created by the physical fact of child birth. Joseph Urgo feels that 'the weakness and vulnerability of women due to the physiological burden of childbearing forms the tragic theme' of the novel.<sup>92</sup> As Emma prepares to give birth, 'she wished in herself there was a woman who would know what to do without telling' (12). Lisa Kirby suggests that the description of the childbirth demonstrates 'that childbirth was viewed as horrific and animalistic,'<sup>93</sup> while Paula Rabonowitz

<sup>89</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 113.

<sup>90</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 161.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>92</sup> Urgo, 'Proletarian Literature,' 71.

<sup>93</sup> Lisa A. Kirby, "'How It Grieves the Heart of a Mother [...]': The Intersections of Gender, Class, and Politics in Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*," *Women's Studies*, v. 37 (2008): 668.

states that ‘the maternal space ... can ... appear as horrifying, monstrous, and destructive of identity.... To the male spectator, birth and its labor present a frightening image of strangeness; for the woman, birth—like labor under capitalism for the working class—is the “vampire ... weighing you down and sucking your spirit” like a grotesque parasite invading the female body.’<sup>94</sup> Emma in this scene also wishes that ‘the men were where they belonged when a woman was in travail – somewhere out on the mountains or at a neighbor’s’ (12). Grandpap tries his best but is ill-prepared emotionally or physically for Emma’s difficult childbirth. In these opening scenes, Lumpkin immediately sets forth the clear difference between the roles of men and women within the mountain society (which reflect those of the wider society in the case of gender relations). She also foreshadows the fear and horror that is to be experienced later in the novel. Perhaps more importantly she sets up a theme that will recur: men, in spite of being the dominant sex within the mountain culture, have many weaknesses, are child-like much of the time, and struggle to face those challenges that cannot be met simply by brute force.

Emma’s opinion that men are like children, albeit powerful ones whose control she accepts, is elaborated on at the start of Chapter Three while she is lamenting Grandpap’s occasional frivolousness with money:

Grandpap could not understand how they needed money for food. A man did not watch the meal get lower in the bag and wonder where money for the next lot would come. He didn’t see the slab of fatback get smaller until there was just a greasy end left for boiling with cabbage. And then no more (23).

Later in the novel, at the birth of Minnie’s child, Ora asserts that ‘a man is a danger to every good woman and she’s got to know it.... A danger to every woman good or bad. I tell my Sally to look on men that they’re as deadly as rattlesnakes’ (94). And although Ora qualifies this statement by adding that ‘I’m not a-talking about husbands, but men and girls unmarried’, the bold sense of men as ‘other’ and as a threat to women is clear: patriarchy is a problem for the women, but one which they appear to accept. Urgo points to this scene as demonstrating how ‘the parcelling of the female body and functions among domineering males is ... symbolically’ represented: ‘while Minnie, a local mountain girl of dubious morality, is giving birth

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<sup>94</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 112-3.

to a baby boy of dubious paternity, the men outside the house are cutting up and dividing the body of a “she bear”<sup>95</sup>.

This sense of difference between the sexes is also highlighted when a young John is left behind while his older brothers and Grandpap go off on an adventure: ‘It was not often that Grandpap and the boys included him in their excursions, for they still felt that he belonged with the women’ (24-5). This fact bothers John, who longs to be old enough to be accepted into the world of men. That world is presented as being a superior place, but there is a sense of irony in this when the child-like portrayal of men is considered, especially given that in this scene the men are going out to hunt. Such an activity was a necessity but still could be considered fun, and it is certainly the type of activity that children mimic in play form. As he grows, John, who ‘felt contemptuous of women and of any kind of womanish ways in a man’, (76) evinces a developing though troubled machismo, echoing W. J. Cash’s ‘savage ideal’:

Sometimes at night when Grandpap and Basil and Kirk were away the boy wanted to climb in with Emma and Bonnie instead of going to his own place. But he had a code about what a man could rightly do. He would betray himself and his code if he went back to sleeping with the women. And Kirk, who had begun to let John tag along on occasions, would once more think of him as belonging with them (75).

In fact, this macho world is potentially oppressive to both men and women. In an echo of the community’s view on Britt’s lack of violent, macho reaction to Ishma leaving him for Rad Bailey in *Call Home the Heart*, Jim Hawkins feels his maleness as somehow weakened because when he found his wife ‘in the back shed with a fellow who lived under South Range’, he ‘had turned the woman out and done nothing to the man. Only he kept Minnie [his daughter] at home, never leaving her at night except for Saturday evenings when he went to the store’ (44). In Chapter Eleven, Kirk and Basil McClure come to blows over their desire for Jim Hawkins’ daughter, Minnie, and although the argument and subsequent fight is intensified by Basil’s indignation about Kirk’s blaspheming, it remains nevertheless an argument initiated by their claim to a woman. Clearly, men feel that women are their possessions, but there is also a sense that a man should fight for his female

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<sup>95</sup> Urgo, ‘Proletarian Literature,’ 72.

possession and punish anybody who takes that possession from him. Yet for many men, these expectations are difficult to meet.

In Chapter Thirty-One Lumpkin explains that the world of violence impinges upon males more than females. Describing life in the mill town school, she states: 'John was learning in the schoolroom. But there were things he had to learn outside that Bonnie was spared' (211). Lumpkin is referring to the bullying and violence of the after-school environment. A group of boys taunts John, and the event eventually escalates into violence. But in a situation that foreshadows the unfair nature of the fight between the poor workers and the rich mill owners, John is faced with multiple attackers. He is confused by this because 'in the hills ... it was man against man. He could not quite make out how to manage with several against him, for the boys who nagged him were always together' (211).

Lumpkin does, however, emphasise that men and women are in many ways not all that different. The presence of the 'dual heroes' is an obvious example. Another is John's first visit to the store, which leaves him feeling disappointed. Nothing really happens there: the men simply talk and sing. 'For such a long time he had envied the boys when they went with Grandpap to the store at night, and now he had been there it hadn't seemed very unusual' (69). In effect, men are presented as being no different from women in this scene, except perhaps in the subject matter of their conversations. John's nurtured sexism is also evident in how he hates the maiden who features in the song he hears. He feels that she 'had run around so crazily. It showed how foolish women could be. No man could have been fooled like that' (69). Yet in spite of all this, John keeps up the pretence to his sister Bonnie that 'wonderful and mysterious things had happened the night before, things that she must never be told' (69). The young John is at this point in the novel helping to sustain a masculine myth that the world of men is somehow not for women to know anything about.

Lumpkin demonstrates through these various mountain scenes that patriarchy is a cultural phenomenon that assigns roles and keeps everyone 'in place'. It appears to be accepted by all the characters, for a variety of reasons and factors. Some of these reasons and factors are forced upon them in a way that would not always be the case in Western society today: the danger and difficulty of childbirth,



Urgo's 'tragic theme' of the novel, is the foremost of these, because giving birth in isolated mountain cabins made women especially vulnerable during this potentially deadly process. Yet it is to some extent a cultural phenomenon that dictates the apparent necessity for men to be the ones to protect women and to fulfil roles such as being the hunters. The use of guns for hunting negates much of the physical element of such a role, and therefore neutralises one of the advantages that men may have over women in undertaking it. Bonnie pushes at the boundaries that patriarchy has set, particularly when she is older. She is presented as a strong female character, even if ultimately she is not quite the feminist role model that Ishma in *Call Home the Heart* represents.

Although Emma McClure is portrayed as a hardy and powerful woman – indeed she drives Sam McEachern away at the end of Chapter Fifteen by standing in her doorway with Grandpap's gun – her views of the relative positions of men and women are ones that indicate an acceptance of the subservient role that women in her world played. The example of her attitude at the childbirth demonstrates that she has a sense of the different places and roles for men and women. This thought process of Emma's is further developed when she thinks about Grandpap's role in the house, a house that actually belonged to her late husband, Jim: 'So the Kirklands were wandering outside somewhere and Pap had come to stay with her. And she was glad. He was a good man and what man didn't want to be head of the house he was in? This was only right' (73). Emma's acceptance of patriarchy is demonstrated again in Chapter Eighteen when she agrees without question that as the eldest son it is Basil's right 'to say we can sell or not sell' (121) the cabin, even though his intentions are selfish: he needs to money to pay for his schooling and books. And this acceptance of Emma's exists despite her acknowledgement that 'often, like all the women she knew, she did a man's work while the men sat and talked' (122). There is nothing like the strength of will to change attitudes displayed by Ishma in *Call Home the Heart*; even Bonnie, who represents a woman from Ishma's generation, will not come close to taking such a stance. But this portrayal of characters accepting the patriarchal status quo is important because such character traits in some way explain the mountain people's initial acceptance of the awful conditions they encounter in the mill town. Also, Lumpkin is writing from within the

problem itself: she is writing about mountain people and is not using outside perspectives. This allows her to emphasize with certain aspects of her characters' lives, such as the images associated with childbirth and the irony of the selfish Basil being supported by Emma in his right to decide the family's fate even though it is Emma who will suffer from the result of his purely self-interested decision.

Critics have sought to explain such apparent contradictions in characters like Emma. Barbara Foley asserts that 'the inadequacies in the left's construction of gender issues were by no means restricted to men: some female writers also glossed over issues that might prove troublesome, evinced difficulty with the representation of female heroism, and even adopted a male gaze',<sup>96</sup> and Lisa A. Kirby builds on this thought: 'Even such revolutionary writers as Grace Lumpkin ... often subvert women's power and leadership potential to that of their husbands.'<sup>97</sup> Society at that time was male-dominated, but it is interesting that even writing with propagandist elements by female authors should still not foreground woman in the way that a feminist perspective would like it to; of those novels studied here, Fielding Burke's are to a certain degree an exception, as is Myra Page's *Moscow Yankee*. This fact does, however, chime with the view on the hard Left, echoing Marx himself, that the labour question should take precedence over the 'woman question' and that women's liberation could wait until after the revolution.<sup>98</sup>

Critics discussing Gastonia novels often focus on the double yoke that women suffer as wives and mothers who are also full-time mill workers. This is an important issue because the Gastonia novels do very much address women's experiences. Janet Zandy explores this issue: "'working-class women are called on to do the work more privileged men and women do not want to do. They clean; they cook; they care for children. They have double work lives and cannot afford to hire help.'"<sup>99</sup> This point is reinforced in Chapter Thirty-five of *To Make My Bread* when despite the new hope brought to the family by the renting of a farm, Emma states: "'I hadn't expected not to work in the mill.... For what would we do for meat and bread every day otherwise?'" (238). In the novel's earlier scenes, Lumpkin had made it clear that

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<sup>96</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 232-3.

<sup>97</sup> Kirby, 'How It Grieves the Heart,' 664.

<sup>98</sup> Coiner, *Better Red*, 71.

<sup>99</sup> Janet Zandy quoted in Kirby, 'How It Grieves the Heart,' 666.

women worked and suffered living in the mountains in a similar way as they do when living in and around the mill towns.

While it can be seen that *To Make My Bread* portrays female characters who have the quiet strength and stoicism needed to hold family and everything else together through changing times, it is not until the latter stages of the novel that something approaching a feminist theme becomes apparent. This change occurs during the strike, in which women play a leading role as they did in the historical events. Lumpkin continues to present female characters who adhere rigidly to the notion that women should be subservient to men: in Chapter Fifty-One, Mrs. Fayon criticizes the roles that Bonnie and Ora are playing, asserting that “the bible says women should be in subjection to their husbands” (337). But in the novel’s latter scenes she portrays women playing a different role, too. Bonnie and Ora continue their heavy involvement with the strike in spite of opinions like those held by Mrs. Fayon. It is Ora who speaks boldly to the militia who have been sent to guard the mill:

“Young Frank,” she said, “are you going t’ fight against your own?”

“Look,” she said and walked toward him from out the ranks of the strikers. “Look, here I am. Why don’t you kill me?”

Young Frank looked sullenly in the line of soldiers and looked straight in front. Ora spoke to them all. “Boys,” she said. “Why don’t you go home and stop fighting against women and children? Air we not your people? Don’t you have mothers that have worked themselves to the bone for ye, and fathers that have slaved? And don’t you slave in mills and other places for low wages? Go home, and don’t fight your own people any more” (351-2).

That it is a woman who speaks these words is important in representing women’s role in the strike. Through her powerful rhetoric, Ora demonstrates recognition of the need for all working people to unite rather than fighting against each other. It is further evidence of Lumpkin’s subversion of gender expectations, emphasizing as it does not only that women were heavily involved in the strike but that they were willing to take a lead in speaking out.

Laura Hapke, however, is negative about Lumpkin’s presentation of Bonnie, the female character upon whom most critics focus (and in doing so miss the point of how important Emma is to the plot and the message of the story). Hapke asserts

that 'Lumpkin's Bonnie is an acceptable labor militant for 1930s audiences: the good mother as trade unionist.... Adhering to the Gastonia rhetoric in which Wiggins is the prominent woman, Lumpkin ... offers Bonnie as ... migrant Madonna on a speaker's platform, the ... politically correct militant mother.'<sup>100</sup> Discussing this issue, Lisa Schreibersdorf builds on 'Paula Rabinowitz's argument that the maternal image was a central trope for representing women workers within 1930s radical women's fiction.'<sup>101</sup> During Bonnie's speech to the crowd about her politicization she explains the reason for it: she is "'the mother of five children'", one of whom died "'because I had t' work in the mill and leave the baby only with my oldest child who was five.... I couldn't do for my children any more than you women on the money we get. That's why I have come out for the union, and why we've all got t' stand for it'" (345). Schreibersdorf states that this speech 'is in fact quite close to one attributed to Ella May Wiggins in magazine articles by Margaret Larkin';<sup>102</sup> she goes on to interpret Bonnie here differently to the way in which Hapke does, believing that the 'speech does two things: it justifies a woman's political activism, and it uses maternity to inspire and explain inspiration for action.'<sup>103</sup>

Schreibersdorf is more critical, however, of the implications suggested by Bonnie's death:

the maternal metaphor ... serves an important function by introducing a feminine presence to the literature; but the way this metaphor is introduced is not unproblematic. While emphasizing the connection between reproduction and production, the depictions also reinscribe the naturalization of the reproductive role for women. Furthermore.... the death of Bonnie erases the Mother's presence from the realized communist union. Although the Mother's presence is necessary for redefinition and rebirth, she is expendable after the union's collective identity is established.<sup>104</sup>

Schreibersdorf's point focuses attention on a key problem, true or otherwise, that the Left had in selling the idea of communism to people: the notion that in a communist world, the individual would no longer matter. However, she also very rightly points out that 'for many readers and members of the labor movement there

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<sup>100</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 163.

<sup>101</sup> Lisa Schreibersdorf, 'Radical Mothers: Maternal Testimony and Metaphor in Four Novels of the Gastonia Strike,' *Journal of Narrative Theory* v. 29, no. 3 (1999): 305.

<sup>102</sup> Schreibersdorf, 'Radical Mothers,' 309.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 313-4.

were specific, material realities of maternity',<sup>105</sup> and it is to Lumpkin's credit that she deals with these issues. On the issue of Bonnie's representation, Schreibersdorf concludes that 'when the organizer ... associates the birth of the union with the body and sacrifice of Bonnie, thus creating a metaphor of maternity, this scene cannot be read in isolation.... The text's literalization of motherhood can help to counter the myth of the mother's naturalized and happy sacrifice—a myth that these same texts call upon as a part of their symbolic portrayal of maternity.'<sup>106</sup>

*To Make My Bread* does not have the same feminist elements that are so dominant in *Call Home the Heart*, but Urgo's assertion that 'it expounds no feminist ideology'<sup>107</sup> is a little short-sighted, for while it does not present a figure like Ishma who wants to forego the trials of motherhood and strive out in life the way men can and do, Lumpkin most certainly does suggest feminist possibilities through the strength of Emma and the fight shown by Bonnie.

#### Race in *To Make My Bread*

Issues regarding race are not raised in *To Make My Bread* to the same challenging extent that they are in Burke's *Call Home the Heart* or Myra Page's *Gathering Storm*; nevertheless, the racial tensions that exist between poor whites and blacks are touched upon 'almost as an aside' according to Susan Sowinska, who states that 'Lumpkin's characters take on the struggle for racial equality at the end of the novel after reactionary elements in the mill town try their hands at strikebreaking by circulating a racist handbill.'<sup>108</sup> Lumpkin makes a powerful point in this late section of the novel: working people need to ignore the colour line and unite as one. Handbills are 'left at the doors of all the houses in the village' declaring: "'YOUR UNION DOES NOT BELIEVE IN WHITE SUPREMACY. THINK ABOUT THAT, WHITE PEOPLE'" (350). The apparent lateness of this realisation by the strikers is probably what leads Sowinska to refer to it as 'almost ... an aside'. It is certainly far from being a central theme of the novel. Even so, and although Lumpkin does not confront the issue in the way that Burke does, Sowinska believes that her

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>107</sup> Urgo, 'Proletarian Literature,' 73.

<sup>108</sup> Sowinska, 'Writing Across the Color Line,' 133.

analysis of the problem is similar to Burke's: wealthy northern capitalists care little about who actually performs the labor in their mills as long as profit can be made. A strong union, therefore, must incorporate all the workers at the mill, both white and black, both the weavers and those that perform the more menial tasks around the mill.<sup>109</sup>

There are moments in *To Make My Bread* that offer a glimpse of how black and white people in the South could work together. One example is found in the fact that Moses, 'the black man who cared for Mrs. Phillip's farm.... was a help to Grandpap.... Grandpap learned from the black man how to put the cotton seed in the ground with the machine, and many other things' (240). Another is seen in the way that Bonnie befriends and later helps Mary Allen. Nevertheless, these examples are few and far between, and more often than not the novel foregrounds the harsh reality of racial prejudice that existed in all social and economic classes of the white community. An acquired racism exists in the young John along with the sexism that he has learned from his upbringing. In response to the story told through Sam Wesley's song in the store, John thinks that 'he would have stood up to the person who was ordering him around and asked, "What do you think I am—a nigger slave?"' (69). John's is a casual racism that he appears to have learned from those around him. Once more, as with the issue of patriarchy, Lumpkin is emphasizing factors of the cultural environment that her characters find it difficult to alter or change. Emma, John's mother, uses similar language when expressing her anger at Minnie's flirtations with multiple men: "I can bear her not helping and letting me wait on her like a nigger slave. But this..." (102). Later, when the family first arrive in the mill town and would like to drink from a public water tap that is being used by a black family, Grandpap expresses the view shared by many poor mountain whites: "They're niggers, Emma.... White and black don't mix" (144). He then looks 'angrily' at the group gathered around the pump, and even though they are thirsty and Emma says that the woman "seems real friendly", he refuses to allow his family to drink the water that is being proffered by a black person.

Reconstruction is an issue to which Lumpkin refers a number of times in *A Sign for Cain*, and it also appears in *To Make My Bread*. In Chapter Twenty-Five, John learns the meaning of the term 'Carpet Bagger', and the explanation he

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 133.

receives includes multiple uses of the word 'nigger' in a derogatory sense. Here, at the same time as she is exposing racist attitudes, Lumpkin is also making the valid point that during Reconstruction there were those motivated not by ideals but by money. In chapters twenty-seven and twenty-eight, Grandpap and John attend a Confederate Civil War reunion: the Congressman who speaks is proud of his racist views and incorporates religion into them as a way of validation, aware as he is that a religious, uneducated white working poor will, on the whole, be swayed by this: "I am for Race Domination. The Creator in his wisdom made the Caucasian race of finer clay than he made any of the colored people" (186). Later in the reunion, in Chapter Twenty-Eight, Grandpap listens eagerly, though John less so, as veterans sit around a campsite and talk proudly of their racist behaviour and of how they have used intimidation and the threat of violence to stop black people from voting.

By this point in the novel there is a suggestion that John is becoming uncomfortable with the extreme racial prejudice that surrounds him, and this nascent discomfort fully reveals itself when John, now older and working in the mill, witnesses the sickening beating of a black man who is working on the chain gang: while Robert Phillips watches with relish and counts the lashes aloud, 'John was lying face down with his face in the dirt. A sickness had come on him. Like Job of old he wanted to curse God and die' (250).

Lumpkin also demonstrates the way in which the social and economic system fuelled racist sentiments. When Grandpap is unable to find work, he blames black people:

There was no work for him in town. He knew how to cut wood and tend a garden, but this sort of work was done by the black men. "If hit wasn't for niggers," Grandpap said to John ..., "I could get work; but they want niggers, because the black man charges less than the white (201).

Grandpap is a victim of an economic order that deems him useless because he is too old to work in the mill, but rather than looking to the source of the problem as John and Bonnie will do, he instead blames those even worse off than he is. Bonnie, once older and organising the strikers, is accused by nameless telephone callers as "nigger lover" because she worked in Stumptown among the colored people.' But, Lumpkin states that 'Bonnie went right on, for she was strong in knowing that Mary

Allen and the others there needed the message as much as her people did' (354). Bonnie understands this fact in the way that Grandpap does not; however, that is not to say that Lumpkin is unsympathetic towards Grandpap. There is, in fact, a strange similarity in her treatment of Grandpap and that of Colonel Gault in *A Sign for Cain*: they are both men caught out of time in a world that is changing beyond their understanding or control. On the other hand, Lumpkin is demonstrating that the racist views of poor whites are a part of what is keeping them from improving their social and economic circumstances.

### The Portrayal of Violence in *To Make My Bread*

As mentioned earlier, scenes of violence and the imagery of violence in both the human and natural worlds occur throughout *To Make My Bread*. As a work that is, according to Walter Rideout, 'quite obviously realistic in literary method'<sup>110</sup> the frequency of violent occurrences is understandable. Yet it serves a greater purpose in the novel than simply existing to aid the realism: the brutality of the natural environment in the mountains, the fact that at times people are 'close to starvation' (28), foregrounds just how harsh life is for the novel's characters, who live in a world in which 'children were born and some of them died. Death came like a storm. You couldn't do anything about it' (73). The mountain people's fatalism, their sense of determinism, throughout the majority of the novel is only really challenged in the later stages when Bonnie and John engage with the notion of free will and realise that they do have some power to influence their own lives.

Lumpkin's highlighting of nature's harshness suggests a connection between this and the violent episodes that punctuate the lives of mountain people. The novel opens in a gathering snow storm, about which, as Emma McClure prepares to give birth, Lumpkin writes metaphorically: the wind, howling 'through the trees like a pack of hounds let loose' (10), 'slapped against the cabin and snarled down the chimney. Snow blew in under the north door and spread over the floor in a hurry and flurry like an unwelcome guest who is trying to make himself at home' (12). And before the brutal birth scene, Lumpkin states how the necks of the steers were 'taut

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<sup>110</sup> Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, 209.



as if the animals were preparing for an enemy' (9). Also in the opening scene, the violent nature of the McEacherns is remarked upon. By referring simultaneously to the threat of a storm and the threat posed by men like Sam McEachern, Lumpkin is pointing to the dual nature of the danger posed by violence to ordinary mountain folk. She also foreshadows the negative role that Sam McEachern and his family will play throughout the novel: they are partly responsible for Grandpap being imprisoned; Sam McEachern kills Kirk; and Sam McEachern then leads the group of hired thugs who replace the militia during the strike. The McEacherns represent the threat from within the poor white community itself. Their purely self-centred, mercenary nature is completely at odds with that of the McClures, who find it in themselves to care for Minnie and her baby, the father of whom is Sam McEachern, in spite of all the suffering that Minnie's presence has brought upon them and that Sam McEachern has caused them.

The gun, wielded almost always by men, is a powerful image in the novel. When the company rent man comes knocking at their now leased hut, Grandpap meets him 'at the door with his shotgun' and drives him away (134), though it is an ultimately futile action. As mentioned already, Emma drives away Sam McEachern at the end of Chapter Fifteen by standing in her doorway with Grandpap's gun. Kirk and Bonnie are killed with guns, and the threat of the gun is the only way in which the police and National Guard can stop the strikers from walking where they want to walk.

The violence of mountain folk, which, as in *Call Home the Heart*, is seen to follow a moral code of sorts, is juxtaposed with the violence practised in the world outside the mountains by those with power and authority. In particular, the violence practised by those with power and authority is almost always violence used against the poor, who are not given the opportunity of a fair fight. The aforementioned whipping of the unnamed man from the chain gang is an obvious example. And in Chapter Thirty-Two the torturous and cruel violence inflicted upon the young John by Albert, who is from a wealthier family that live on the aptly-named Strutt Street, though horrifying enough in itself, is made more disturbing by the fact that John is held down by four of Albert's friends. It is not a fair fight. John does get his own back when the pain inflicted upon him becomes so great that he

breaks free and attacks Albert; yet for this, he knows that he will be the one to get into trouble because the system favours those with money and social status. Shortly after this incident, John is called 'white trash' and has stones thrown at him while walking through the apparently respectable and certainly wealthier part of town (229).

#### Religion in *To Make My Bread*

Grace Lumpkin does not foreground the role of religion in *To Make My Bread* as much as Fielding Burke does in her proletarian novels; nevertheless, the important role that it played historically in the lives of former mountain dwellers of Gastonia is represented in the novel. A number of the figurative images in the book allude to religion. In the relationship between Basil and Kirk McClure there is a certain sense of the biblical Cain and Abel, particularly in Chapter Nine, in which Lumpkin describes their drifting apart and how they began to have 'quarrels' and go 'about their own affairs' (65), and in Chapter Eleven, when they fight over Minnie. On their journey from the mountains to the town, Emma directly references the Bible: "'Hit's like the Israelites ... a-going to the Promised Land'" (142). Grandpap's response is prophetic: "'Only ... I hope the Lord don't leave us in a wilderness for forty years'" (142). Once they are living in the mill town and realise how things really are, Grandpap again refers to the Bible:

"Hit seems they just want the young.... And the young ought to be out a-playing and enjoying. Hit's like in the Bible where they used to put babies in the red hot arms of the idol. I'm a-getting to believe the factory's an idol that people worship and hit wants the young for a sacrifice" (200-201).

The oppressive but hypocritical nature of the religion found in the novel is broached a number of times. Richard Gray suggests that 'the attitude of people like the McClures to the admonitions of the local Baptist preacher is one of wary belief.'<sup>111</sup> Such religion as found in certain mountain communities is discussed by Emma and Ora in Chapter Three when they talk of a place that they had lived where there was 'never any dancing' (25) because of people's faith, though it 'didn't keep them from drinking' (25). Grandpap later responds proudly to the attempted

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<sup>111</sup> Gray, 'A Southern Writer,' 182.

bullying by Preacher Wesley, who attempts to shame him in front of the whole congregation because he plays his fiddle so that people can dance: “‘I’ll say David danced before the Lord and he played on the cymbal and the lute—and if King David could then John Kirkland can. And that’s between him and his Lord. Now ... John Kirkland’s not a-going to stay and be rebuked before his brethren”” (47). At this point, Grandpap leaves defiantly, and the family does not attend church the following week.

The relationship that practical people like the McClures have with religion can be seen in Chapter Five. The church is some distance away from their home, and, like they face everything else in their lives, stoically the family faces the walk. Church appears to be as much a social event as a religious one, and with so few close neighbours, this practicality, reinforced by the social nature of the Baptism scene in Chapter Eight, is important. As discussed earlier, attending church seems to be an ingrained part of the culture, so much so that propagandist function of religion and its role in keeping the people from questioning their circumstances is unnoticed by the people: it becomes a form of invisible propaganda.<sup>112</sup> The ‘burying ground’ further highlights the people’s pragmatism: ‘There were no flowers in the burying ground. The graves lay flat and plain on the slope. The dead were dead and there was enough to do caring for the living’ (42). Richard Gray finds a connection between the characters’ behaviour at the baptism and the historical record of the Gastonia strikers’ behaviour:

Normally stolid and stoic people like the McClures are carried away on a tide of feeling, singing songs about immersion ... while their half-naked children are plunged into the chill mountain streams. Lumpkin is concerned to identify ... the fundamental rhythm of feeling and personality in the hills: pious endurance punctuated by startling moments of release like baptism day. Contemporary observers of the Gastonia strike, and especially those from outside the area, were sometimes baffled by strikers’ vacillation between apathy and violence, mute acceptance of their lot attended by sudden eruptions of political awareness and action.... In her sketch of hill religion, Lumpkin is disclosing a possible reason for what outsiders seemed to find so strange; in this sense, she suggests, the striking mill workers from the hills were translating into political terms an emotional language they had first learned from their religion.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> See Chapter Two, footnote 60, ref. Foulkes.

<sup>113</sup> Gray, ‘A Southern Writer,’ 182.

Grandpap questions the interpretation of the Bible and its use by preachers and mill owners to oppress the working people, but he never questions the existence of a god, and neither does he completely denounce his Christianity. However, towards the end of the novel Lumpkin presents the notion that there is no God. This is at first a shock to Bonnie. Having just introduced her and John to his disabled sister, Robert Phillips states that “if there was a God he couldn’t make my sister like that. They say God is Love, and Love couldn’t do anything cruel like that”; Bonnie reacts by suggesting quietly that “maybe hit’s a punishment” (243). She immediately apologizes for her comment, saying that she “didn’t mean a thing.... Not a thing” and looking ‘frightened and sorry for what she had said. There was no doubt of that’ (243).

Bonnie is not alone in having some belief in superstitions. Other characters are shown to be superstitious and willing to believe in supernatural phenomenon: the women talk of how men drank and told ghost stories and many ‘have heard of visitations’ (26) by the dead. And they believe in signs, too: Jennie Martin pronounces that Granma Wesley “says hit’s a sure sign of a hard winter, her getting the fever so soon” (27).

Bonnie and John do appear to doubt some elements of what they have been told by her religion. Near the end of the novel, John asks John Stevens whether he believes in God. “It’s best not to ask” is the initial response, soon followed by “I believe in a Judgement Day” (260). Interestingly, it is not a complete rejection of the bible that John Stevens uses in Chapter Forty-Nine when explaining left-wing ideas to John; it is almost the opposite, in fact: he highlights the hypocrisy of the preachers and how they are controlled by ‘the rich’ (326), and points John to part of the gospel that predicts an afterlife of misery for the rich who kept the poor downtrodden: “Go to now, ye rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you” (325). This example supports Sylvia Jenkins Cook’s assertion about Lumpkin’s treatment of religion in the novel:

In the mill villages, Lumpkin attacks greed, collaboration, and self-interest among churches and preachers fairly conventionally, but this attack on the latter-day perversions of Christianity might as easily have been made by good Christians and indeed was constantly reiterated in the pages of the *Christian Century* throughout this period. Lumpkin is more reluctant to apply herself in

this novel to the question of whether religion is inherently the enemy of communism.<sup>114</sup>

Even Bonnie eventually grows tired of the negative and oppressive message that the preachers declaim: 'Bonnie could not go to church Sunday after Sunday and hear him scold them ... without getting too angry. So she stayed at home with her young ones' (318). This is a turnaround for Bonnie, who as a young girl of seven and a half felt that she and John needed to sacrifice their beloved dog Georgy to pacify a God whom she felt had been angered by Grandpap's defiance in the church. At the conclusion of that scene, after they have decided that they will not make the sacrifice, Lumpkin paints an image of Bonnie that is as close to the character of Ishma in *Call Home the Heart* as any other Gastonia novel character gets:

She held Georgy close up to her wet face. To have lost something, parted from something loved, and then to have it again made her feel something like God. She felt big and powerful as if she could reach out and take the whole mountain in her arms (52).

Bonnie is a young Mother Earth in this scene, but although she is presented with some of these qualities later in the novel, particularly in that she finds the strength to help those in need while actually in need herself, and also in that the music for the strike comes from her, Bonnie is never quite represented as having the same connection with nature that Ishma has.

#### The Presentation of Poor Mountain People in *To Make My Bread*

For Lumpkin, the McClures' nature provides the model that a wider society should follow. However, there is also a suggestion that the community can be its own worst enemy. The social structure of the community and the adherence it has, however warily, to religious order, work against it; this echoes the way in which Emma's passive acceptance of patriarchy works against her in spite of her strength. And Lumpkin also suggests that the apparent focus on small matters is problematic: on the baptising day, which serves for the community as much as a social event as a religious one, Sally McLure is terrified of slipping on the rocks in the creek because she feels that 'it would be a disastrous thing, remembered for years by the whole

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<sup>114</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 112.

community, if she slipped and fell' (62). This scene links in with the idea of 'the gaze' as discussed in earlier chapters: the watchers in this situation have a great deal of power over the one or ones being watched. It is also an example of a society's self-policing of conventions, rather like the whole acceptance of religion and sexual discrimination among the mountain people, which parallels the idea of the horizontal spread of propaganda, whereby an idea initially introduced vertically from power-holding institutions becomes accepted without question because everybody apparently shares it. Such a concept is connected with the invisible propaganda mentioned earlier: in effect, ideas initially introduced to manipulate the way in which people think become viewed as 'common sense' by the community even though the reasons why this is are never fully analyzed.<sup>115</sup>

Lumpkin presents the mountain folk as insular and rather mistrustful of the outside world, which they see as most definitely a separate entity. Grandpap in particular is sad about this decreasing separation between the two worlds: "'Hit's not like it was. Seems every year the outside creeps nearer'" (71). The people are strong and able to 'carry the burden' (103) under which they labour, but they naïvely believe that the sale of their land might work out well for them. Grandpap voices doubts about this at the end of Chapter Eighteen, but ultimately their attempts to "'have ... [their] rights'" (127) proves futile. Their near starvation in the winters also leaves them with little choice but to leave the mountains, despite Grandpap's wariness of the economic system into which they will be entering: "'The mill brings money.... But I'd rather have my cabin and my piece of land. A cabin and land is there. You leave it and come back and there it is again. But money goes fast'" (133). Grandpap is a rugged individualist and this speech demonstrates his belief in such a lifestyle. However, there are also those among the mountain community, in particular the women, who aspire to something better for their children than living on the edge of starvation, and these people see education as the way that their children can have a better life. Basil sees this too, but he quite literally sells out his family's home and leaves them with nothing in order that he can get his education and entry into middle-class society.

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<sup>115</sup> See Chapter Two, footnotes 60 and 69, ref. Foulkes.

Throughout *To Make My Bread* Lumpkin makes it clear just how much the doctrine of 'divide and rule' has permeated into the thinking of the mountain people. Grandpap's loyalty to the Confederate cause is one such example, and his eventual surrender to the ways of the capitalist system another far more poignant one. This point is made most clearly in Chapter Thirty-Three when Lumpkin explains how the resentment of the mill workers was directed towards the 'higher ups on Strutt Street' but never towards 'the really big ones, those who lived in the town. There was interest, and if the man who owned the mill, who lived in Washington, came down, there was excitement. Everybody said he was as common as mill people and spoke to all as if he was on their level' (221). It is only when John and Bonnie are exposed to left-wing politics that they begin to understand this process and how the mill workers' attitude is in effect part of the problem.

#### Imagery in *To Make My Bread*

Despite being a work that includes elements of propaganda and social realism, *To Make My Bread* contains a number of images that allude to religion and spirituality. Lumpkin also makes use of metaphor to heighten the plot's tension while at the same time reinforcing the dark, almost demonic nature of the mill. This imagery is extremely effective and reinforces the book's central message: the necessity of socialism. Such imagery is of course most obvious in the Chapter Thirty-Three scene from which the novel's title is derived. The chapter opens with a gentle metaphor for the mill: 'an old hen' clucking to her chickens every day (219). Lumpkin explains how Emma thought at first that 'the throb of the mill had been like the throb of a big heart beating for the good of those who worked under the roof, for it gave hope of desires to be fulfilled' (219). But her view quickly changes. The sound in the weave room is compared to 'the sound of sinners' teeth grinding in hell' (219), and 'now to Emma the throb of a heart had changed. She was feeling the grind of teeth. The mill crunched up and down—"I'll grind your bones to make my bread"' (219). Sylvia Jenkins Cook believes this to be an example of how Emma is 'unable to comprehend' reality when faced with it, and that it is an example of the fact that Ora and Emma's 'expectations of urban life are shaped by a rural

consciousness that they never fully lose.’<sup>116</sup> There is some truth in this, but ultimately the issue is not that Emma cannot comprehend this new reality but rather that she does not see a way of ever altering it; such hope for the future is left to her children. However, the direct echo of the fairy tale ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ and the parallels between it and the novel’s plot are clear: the mountain people are sold a dream by the mill agents in the way that Jack is sold magic beans; unlike Jack, though, the mountain people have been sold a lie. And yet the novel does end on the aforementioned note of optimism, suggesting that those promised riches and better lives could still be attainable if only the people can slay the ogre that is the oppressive economic order.

The mill is presented through a number of other figurative images throughout the book. When the McClures first lay eyes on it, the ‘two huge chimneys, towering into the sky’ are compared with ‘two towers of Babel’ with smoke pouring ‘out of them into the wide open heavens’ (147). And almost straight afterwards, the power of the factory is revealed. Emma compares the rumbling sound to a church song: “‘There’s power in the factory’” (149) she states twice just before the factory whistle, described as ‘a terrible, earsplitting shriek, as if many people cried out in sorrow, just at once’ (149) gives them a fright and the factory doors ‘belch...’ people out while its windows are ‘fiery eyeballs that watched the home-goers steadily’ (150). The ‘throb’, ‘rumble’ and ‘shake’ of the mill is mentioned numerous times, and the mill ages Emma almost immediately: ‘Now she felt old and not new as she had when the first started out from the mountains.... The sound of the machines was still in her ear, and she could still feel the throb going through her feet into her body, making it ache’ (198). As if to reinforce the dominance that this building has over its workers’ lives, a fellow employee tells Emma that “‘when the machine stops, pay stops’” (197). And life in the mill and mill village is said to affect people’s appearance: ‘Those who had come down from the hills kept some of their healthiness, but the children of these and their grandchildren had the mark of the mill.... “The mark of the beast,” John Stevens called it’ (324).

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<sup>116</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 114.



The mill workers seem to share the McClures' feelings that the mill is somehow a living thing, a god-like being controlling their lives, for when meeting to arrange the strike, 'the talking was not loud. They seemed to have a fear that the mill would hear them' (334). Later, John elucidates the danger that the strikers face with another figurative comparison, this time a simile: 'the mill was now roused like a beast that has been disturbed in its pleasant slumbers, and comes lumbering forth to kill or maim what has disturbed it' (354). Yet perhaps Lumpkin's most damning indictment of the mill and the system under which the mill hands are made to work is found in the way that its bureaucracy affects the mind of the young Bonnie when the family first arrives:

Then it was Bonnie, thirteen, and John, eleven, who must stand. It sounded to Bonnie from the way the man repeated before he put down the name that he had given her another name that was not McClure, and for some time she thought of herself as Bonnie Thirteen instead of Bonnie McClure (156).

This scene has wider implications: Lumpkin is criticizing any system in which people are dehumanized and treated as numbers. Although here she is directing this attack on the unregulated capitalism that was treating mill workers as expendable fodder, there are echoes of the same attack in her later rejection of communism.

Another of the powerful images in the novel relates to violence and comes just before Basil and Kirk have their fight over Minnie. Dreaming of entering the world of grown men that he reveres, John recalls the story of how his great-grandfather once shot off the tails of forty squirrels swimming single file 'with one single shot from his gun' (76). This apparently cruel behaviour is a rite of passage; a man who can shoot off a squirrel or rabbit's tail is much respected and gets to keep the tail as a badge of honour. Yet when read in the wider context of the novel, Lumpkin appears to be doing more here than simply pointing out the ways of mountain men: she is setting up a kind of allegory. Once in the town, the mountain folk, labelled as 'white trash', are viewed by many of the middle class as almost as an inferior species, a fact that makes the cruel treatment that they suffer more palatable to those middle classes. Viewed by her murderers as this 'white trash', Bonnie will later be in effect hunted down and casually killed with the same indifference with which mountain men shoot at animals like the bear they kill in Chapter Fourteen or

with which Grandpap's father apparently shot the rabbits, according to the story recalled in Chapter Eleven. It is unlikely that Lumpkin is seeking to open a debate about people's treatment of animals, but there is power in the imagery of people being killed by other people with the same indifference with which some people kill animals.

This treatment of the poor whites by the middle classes also bring to mind the vicissitudes of the natural environment, which is completely indifferent to all humans yet has such a profound effect on the lives of those living in the mountains. Again, it may not be Lumpkin's key focus, but the image is stark and emphasises that in dealing with phenomenon such as the potential harshness of the natural environment, all humanity has common difficulties to overcome. And yet it is the poorest that are left to suffer the worst effects of such difficulties.

This analysis of Lumpkin's use of imagery reinforces Richard Gray's point, quoted earlier, that the novel's achievement lies 'in the carefully graduated account of the different responses among the hill folk<sup>117</sup> to their altered circumstances. Lumpkin uses imagery to foreground these responses while touching on a number of the themes and issues that affect the hill folk's lives: violence, religion, the economic system, and, in the form of the opening childbirth scene, gender. As well as this, her imagery enhances the quality of the writing, a crucial factor when it is remembered that whatever its message, for a novel to have any effect, people first must want to read it. Lumpkin's novel is relatively accessible, despite its length, yet despite this accessibility she manages to include multiple layers of meaning and reveals much about the lives of those involved in the events at Gastonia.

## **Conclusion**

### **A Comparison between Lumpkin and the Other Authors Being Used in this Thesis**

What separates Grace Lumpkin's story from the other authors being studied in this thesis is that after the 1930s she turned so far away from radical politics. As information about the true nature of Stalin's regime became available, and particularly after the signing of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, many

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<sup>117</sup> Gray, 'A Southern Writer,' 183.

leftist writers and intellectuals did turn away from communism. Constance Coiner quotes Russell David Peck in describing how many of them “felt betrayed, most certainly by Russia, but also by their own social, political, and economic ideas and ideals. They renounced both, and in the act of renunciation they jettisoned the literature which those ideas and ideals had created”.<sup>118</sup> Even so, and despite the fact that, like Burke, she was never an actual member of the Communist Party, Grace Lumpkin’s ideological shift was ostensibly dramatic because of how actively she sought to renounce her past political ties. Yet it has been seen here that it is possible to understand potential reasons for Lumpkin’s change of opinion, evidence for which exists not only in her life story but also within her writing. Aside from more subtle proofs, her two proletarian novels *To Make My Bread* and *A Sign for Cain* deal with issues other than just the cause of the political Left. *To Make My Bread* can be read primarily as a novel about mountain folk of Appalachia and the changing economic conditions that led them to working in mill towns, while *A Sign for Cain* spends much time exploring the social, economic and political changes that affected the South after the Civil War.

There are some ambiguities about Grace Lumpkin’s life story, and this lack of clarity, although minor, mirrors to an extent the more uncertain histories of Anzia Yezierska and Fielding Burke. Lumpkin’s writing shares obvious similarities with that of Fielding Burke and Myra Page in terms of subject matter, and her style falls somewhere between the two. She perhaps lacks the literary beauty that Burke’s writing at times touches on; *To Make My Bread* does, though, feature some evocative phrases and paragraphs as well as powerful imagery, and Lumpkin’s direct prose makes her writing accessible, which is a wonderful quality in a writer, especially when coupled with layers of meaning. However, Lumpkin is not as direct, didactic and propagandist as Myra Page, the only author studied here who was a member of the Communist Party.

Like Burke and Page, Lumpkin does not write with sense of openness and what might be called flair of Anzia Yezierska, and her focus is less on the individual than was Yezierska’s, or even Burke’s. In this respect, her writing is more closely

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<sup>118</sup> David Russell Peck quoted in Constance Coiner, *Better Red*, 34.

linked with Myra Page's, though in her depiction of life in the mountains, and her decision to use this as a large part of her Gastonia novel, *To Make My Bread* resembles the 1930s novels of Burke. Lumpkin's life story is one of changing extremes, and the characters and story of *To Make My Bread*, by some distance her best work, reflect these extremes in an interesting and enlightening manner.

## Chapter Six

### Myra Page

#### Page's Life

'During almost all of her long life (1897—1993), Myra Page was a radical activist—a Communist, a unionist, a feminist, and opponent of racism and war',<sup>1</sup> states Barbara Foley. 'Born in 1897, [Myra] Page grew up in an affluent and cultured home in Newport News, Virginia, the daughter of a prominent local doctor and an artistically gifted mother.'<sup>2</sup> She was born Dorothy Page Gray, but, according to Wes Mantooh, "'in the late twenties," she took the pseudonym Myra Page in order to publish her radical writing without worrying about embarrassing her more conservative family members or jeopardizing her career as a university sociology professor.... In her non-radical professional life, she used the name Dorothy Gray, even after marrying John Markey in 1926'.<sup>3</sup> She shares with Anzia Yezierska and Fielding Burke the distinction of having changed her name, and Mantooh's suggested reason for her doing so is similar to those reasons suggested in this thesis about Burke's use of a pseudonym. Despite her lifelong activism, this use of dual names, pragmatic though it may have been, possibly intimates an unwillingness to risk her whole lifestyle for the communist cause.

Page states that her family's history 'goes back on both sides, as far as we know, to colonial days',<sup>4</sup> her father's side of the family coming from Wales and her mother's side from Gloucester, England. Like Grace Lumpkin, her family had been

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Foley in *Moscow Yankee* by Myra Page [1935] (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), Introduction, vii.

<sup>2</sup> Wes Mantooh, *"You Factory Folks Who Sing This Rhyme Will Surely Understand": Culture, Ideology, and Action in the Gastonia Novels of Myra Page, Grace Lumpkin, and Olive Dargan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 5.

Baker subtitles her work 'A First-Person Biography' and quotes Maurice Isserman in describing this genre as falling "into the cracks between autobiography, oral history, biography, and documentary collection." Besides her own interviews conducted with Page between 1987 and 1991, she uses five other interviews conducted between 1975 and 1986, and 'occasionally' draws 'from Page's journalistic prose, poetry, and letters' to create 'what Clifford Geertz calls a "blurred narrative": combining, integrating, and overlapping several distinct oral and literary forms'. The result, Baker says, 'is a merger of Page's voices into a single autobiographical voice derived from various texts addressed to audiences over a sixty-five-year period.' (All quotes from the Introduction, xxi). It is this 'single autobiographical voice' created for Page by Baker that will be used here.

Confederate supporters during the Civil War; her 'grandfathers fought under Lee, and', she says, 'they worshipped him.'<sup>5</sup> Page states that her grandmother 'never defended the Civil War', and explains that despite the 'tradition in the South not to talk about the war,' a question about it from the young Myra did elicit a response: "It wasn't right. The Lord didn't intend for any of his children to be slaves for other people, but it should never have come to war".<sup>6</sup> Besides demonstrating that opinions among people in the antebellum South were as varied as among people anywhere, this anecdotal evidence forms a piece of the explanation of how despite what Mantooth calls her 'privileged class background' <sup>7</sup> Page came to be a political radical, pointing as it does to a young girl with a mind to ask probing questions and remember answers that do not necessarily conform to the social norms of the time.

The viewpoints and actions of Page's parents promoted in her a sense of the need for social justice, and might, however unwittingly, have pushed her towards radical politics. Her father, Benjamin Roscoe Gary, was a doctor whom Page describes as caring deeply about people. She tells of how despite the imminence of his pregnant wife's labour, he cycled out during a storm 'to take care of a black child with a tetanus infection' because 'there were no black doctors in the county, and no other white doctor would go.'<sup>8</sup> And in response to colleagues criticizing him for 'serving both the white and the black populations', opining that his real interests lay with more 'well-to-do-people', her father stated that "A human being's a human being." He treated those who didn't pay him, and Page describes him as 'a liberal and a humanitarian.'<sup>9</sup> She portrays her mother, Willie Alberta Barham, as 'a gifted artist' whose family did not necessarily encourage this talent. Willie did, however, work teaching Art and English, having chosen this relatively unusual alternative over staying at home and marrying: 'few middle-class women, much less those of genteel backgrounds, worked outside the home at that time.'<sup>10</sup> However, as Deborah S. Rosenfelt states, once she was married and had children, Page's mother 'devoted herself primarily to meeting the more traditional obligations of white Southern

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<sup>5</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

womanhood'.<sup>11</sup> Rosenfelt asserts that Page's relationship with her mother was one of 'ambivalence'; nevertheless, the life her mother led played an important role in shaping Page's views:

In her mother and her mother's sisters, each gifted with artistic or musical talent, Page came to see the waste of women's talents in a society that relegated those talents to dilettantism—a waste these women themselves questioned without openly challenging its systemic dimensions. Page's feminism is both a reaction against and a legacy of this contradictory heritage.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Page 'commented in later years that her awareness of "the woman question, without being very concrete, developed very early"'.<sup>13</sup>

Page asserts that her parents pushed against conservative norms, though they 'never pushed too far', her mother, for example, disagreeing with Jim Crow laws but never openly fighting them.<sup>14</sup> The family employed a woman of mixed race named Belle to work in the house, and Page's relationship with her helped ferment a dislike of the racial injustice that existed in the South and more widely in the country. Page learned to read young and says that she grew up 'surrounded by books'.<sup>15</sup> But ironically, perhaps the biggest influence on her later ideals was her Confederate grandfather: she recalls his 'strong influence' in her life, and in particular his 'Lost Cause' poems that gave Page 'the idea that being a rebel was nice and acceptable', an idea that she tellingly declares 'stayed with me.'<sup>16</sup>

At Westhampton College, Myra Page 'became friends with several young women who shared her liberal views,'<sup>17</sup> and they supported each other through their pacifism in the face of World War I and their belief in racial integration. Page was also active in the YWCA at this time. 'After college, Page taught ... for a year and then went north to Columbia University'<sup>18</sup> where she completed 'a master's degree in sociology',<sup>19</sup> being taught in the process by, among others, John Dewey, the man with whom Anzia Yezierska, who also attended Columbia, was famously involved.

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<sup>11</sup> Deborah S. Rosenfelt in *Daughter of the Hills: A Woman's Part in the Coal Miners' Struggle* [1950] (New York: The Feminist Press, 1986), Afterword, 248.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 249.

<sup>13</sup> Foley, *Moscow Yankee*, Introduction, viii.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 251.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 20.

After leaving Columbia, 'Page took a position as a YWCA industrial secretary at a silk mill near Norfolk' where 'she gained intimate and troubling glimpses into factory labor'.<sup>20</sup> Mantooth explains Page's next move:

In a further attempt to transcend her privileged class background and understand working-class life, Page again left the South in 1921 and, against the wishes of her family, sought factory work in Philadelphia.... Through various menial jobs, she attempted to "study the working people as one of them," at the same time realizing that, unlike most of the workers around her, she could always fall back on her family's financial security'.<sup>21</sup>

During her time in Philadelphia, she witnessed first-hand the violence wrought by workers against fellow workers who refused to strike: such workers were, she says, 'apt to get beaten up'.<sup>22</sup> Page 'disagreed with the tactic' but was shocked to discover the true brutality of strikes.<sup>23</sup> Grace Lumpkin mentions this darker side of worker solidarity in *Full Circle*, but it otherwise remains an historical truth largely ignored by the proletarian novelists featured in this thesis. This is a good example of how propaganda operates. More balanced pieces of literature might choose to study both sides of the debate, but the authors featured here are portraying one particular point of view in an attempt to manipulate people's opinions. They are also providing a small segment of work, be it artistic or factual (and the work of the Gastonia novelists here does to some extent include elements of both) that operates as propaganda for union members and strikers of that time. With regard to Gastonia, this small segment is opposed by far a larger and more powerful amount of propaganda in support of the mill owners and their tactics. Furthermore, these authors were writing the story of the mill workers, and so it is natural that their point of view is what it is. This is an important point: a piece of art should not automatically be labelled as propagandist because it only portrays one side of a story: showing only one side may have been its artistic intent.

It was in Philadelphia that Page met and formed an 'important friendship' with Hilda Shapiro, a 'working-class organizer'<sup>24</sup>. Page described Hilda as "'a real

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>22</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 252.



feminist”<sup>25</sup> who taught her ‘about standing up for ... [herself] as a woman.’<sup>26</sup> ‘The two women worked together to set up union shops in Philadelphia and St. Louis’, and it was Hilda who ‘encouraged Page’s interest in workers’ education.’<sup>27</sup> ‘Page’s experiences in the clothing-workers union convinced her of the difficulty of bridging the gap between the workers’ culture and her own’, and ‘after deciding against the life of a professional organizer, Page taught at the University of Minnesota’,<sup>28</sup> where she worked towards her doctorate and met her husband, John Markey, a fellow teacher whom she married in the summer of 1925 and with whom she had two children in the 1930s.

In 1929 Page adapted her 1927 doctoral dissertation, “Some Behavior Patterns of Southern Textile Workers,” into *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor*, described by Mantooth as a ‘commercially published, non-fiction study’<sup>29</sup> in which she says she tried ‘to avoid academic language so that it might appeal to a working-class audience’; she also explains that ‘many lines and quotes in *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor* appear later in ... *Gathering Storm*.’<sup>30</sup> The field work for her dissertation was undertaken ‘in the summers of 1925 and 1926’ when she spent ‘several weeks in “mill hills” outside of Greenville, South Carolina, and Gastonia, North Carolina, both major textile cities.’<sup>31</sup> Page ‘wanted to analyze the prospects for building a union movement in the South’ and ‘argued for the necessity of organizing black and white workers equally’ and for the ‘collective ownership and operation of the Southern Mills.’<sup>32</sup> However, Mantooth believes that she was initially uncertain of how likely the ‘prospects for building strong unions in the southern mills’ were.<sup>33</sup> She did not feel that the workers had a collective mindset, finding that they were “‘very individualistic. Their habits of action and therefore of thought rarely extend beyond the small family group”.’<sup>34</sup> Mantooth suggests that

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 252.

<sup>28</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>30</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 98.

<sup>31</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 253.

<sup>33</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

she believed ‘conservative religious convictions contributed to their passivity’, but nevertheless she ‘saw some potential for positive collective action, particularly among “workers [who] had come down from the mountains where communal attitudes were strong”’.<sup>35</sup> The 1929 Gastonia Strike led Page to believe more completely in this potential.

Page says that she and her husband ‘joined the Communist Party, the group most dedicated to organizing labor’, while ‘in Minnesota’.<sup>36</sup> Their year of joining was probably around 1924 or 1925. E. A. Schachner ‘echoes Grace Lumpkin’s and Myra Page’s own explanations of their conversions to communism’ when ‘he argues that the history of southern white male culture ... constrained elite white women within the double standard, creating a sensitivity among these privileged women to the plight of black and white workers.’<sup>37</sup> ‘In the summer of 1928’, Page states that she travelled with John to ‘England, Germany, and the Soviet Union.’<sup>38</sup> A year later, she did not actually go to Gastonia during the Loray Mill strike, explaining that she was ‘asked not to’ because ‘although I had done some organizing, I wasn’t really gifted that way.’<sup>39</sup>

Page details how in 1930, she and John ‘began to work full-time for the movement’,<sup>40</sup> and they returned for their second trip to the Soviet Union in September 1931.<sup>41</sup> Page’s experiences on her trips form the basis of her 1935 novel *Moscow Yankee*, though she had by this point already published her Gastonia novel, *Gathering Storm* (1932). Living in Manhattan in the mid-1930s, she was heavily involved in the League of American Writers and its first congress in 1935. In 1943, Myra and John moved to Yonkers, New York, to a house they eventually left in 1986, moving to the Andrus Memorial Home in Hastings-on-Hudson. Although she left the Communist Party in 1953, Page continued to be active in Left-wing politics throughout the rest of her long life, saying in the late 1980s that her ‘involvement as a member of the Left movement’ was ‘ongoing’ and that she was ‘still loyal to the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press), 26.

<sup>38</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 95.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 119.

Communist Party even though I wouldn't be comfortable inside it now.'<sup>42</sup> Myra Page died in 1993.

### **The Feminist Theme in Page's 'Other' 1930s Novels: *Moscow Yankee* & *Daughter of the Hills***

Myra Page only published two novels in the 1930s, *Gathering Storm* in 1932 and *Moscow Yankee* in 1935. However, she actually began writing *Daughter of the Hills* in the late thirties, and the research for the book was certainly done during the thirties. As Rosenfelt states, 'Page continued to work on the novel itself during the war years, but in its origins and much of its writing, *Daughter of the Hills* is a novel of the thirties.'<sup>43</sup>

Walter B. Rideout states that *Moscow Yankee* is the only proletarian novel of the first half of the twentieth century to have 'a Russian setting.'<sup>44</sup> In her Introduction to the 1995 University of Illinois edition of the novel, Barbara Foley describes the work as 'one of the very few developed portraits of Soviet socialist construction in the entire canon of American proletarian fiction'.<sup>45</sup> Foley asserts that in wanting to give the novel 'the ring of veracity.... [Page] adhered closely to her observations during a 1931-33 visit to the Soviet Union.'<sup>46</sup> Regarding the question of authenticity in the novel, Page says:

Much of what I recorded in *Soviet Main Street* later became part of ... *Moscow Yankee*. I saw the story firsthand, and I wanted to write it. I tried to create a true picture of the people and the life beginning to emerge.... *Moscow Yankee* is not a bright utopian picture, nor should it be. It's a picture of struggle and of people moving.<sup>47</sup>

Page also states that she did 'very little inventing in *Moscow Yankee*.... because I featured the characters more or less as true.'<sup>48</sup> And while admitting that she may have been influenced by John Dos Passos's stream-of-consciousness style, she 'wanted to make sure *Moscow Yankee* was really down to earth', in part to please

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>43</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 247.

<sup>44</sup> Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* [1956] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 196.

<sup>45</sup> Foley, *Moscow Yankee*, Introduction, ix.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Baker, *In Generous Spirit*, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 131.

Mike Gold, who, she claims, 'considered women writers sentimentalists, and ... was looking for realism.'<sup>49</sup> The novel is a bildungsroman, a genre which, according to Foley, 'proletarian writers used ... to write novels of "conversion" – that is, narratives tracing a protagonist's development from false consciousness to class consciousness, from alienation and passivity to collectivity and activism. Page's novel', Foley asserts, 'exemplifies the conversion plot',<sup>50</sup> focusing as it does on Frank Anderson, known as Andy, an ex-Ford worker who builds a new life in Moscow and in the process loses his sense of American superiority and embraces the Soviet experiment.

Central to Andy's conversion is a woman: Natasha. Page based Natasha on Valya Cohen, a young woman whom she knew well. Page states that 'Valya herself was not a factory girl, but there were girls in the factory much like her', and she uses her as the model because she knew Valya 'as a character better than any of the others'.<sup>51</sup> Page builds on the feminism found in *Gathering Storm* through Natasha: she is a strong, assured lead female character, and although the novel's central character and focus of the bildungsroman is Andy, the novel can be read as one designed, at least in part, to foreground women and what they can achieve in a society that actively seeks gender equality. The character of Natasha certainly demonstrates such possibilities. She is introduced in Chapter Five as a woman worker who believes in the communist experiment and who is keen to help build a new Russia. At the same time, it is clear that she is athletic and competitive, eager to use her allocated 'biweekly swim'<sup>52</sup> time to train for an upcoming swimming competition against a rival factory. From the outset, however, Natasha is presented as a well-rounded character, for strong and tough as Natasha is, Page avoids the trap of creating a one-dimensional, machine-like worker-woman. She is continually running late, a fact for which she chides herself while at the same time dreaming of owning a wrist watch; Page uses this desire for a watch to emphasize the relative poverty of Russians compared with Americans. Natasha is dismissive of Andy's apology when, in what is their first interaction, he hurts her head by accidentally

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>50</sup> Foley, *Moscow Yankee*, Introduction, xx.

<sup>51</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 133.

<sup>52</sup> Page, *Moscow Yankee*, 65.

colliding with her in the pool; she thinks in her mind that he is a 'gawky dunce' and a 'clumsy boob', while at the same moment she notices his 'nice eyes'.<sup>53</sup> She falls in love with Andy, and their relationship is on a level footing, completely unlike the relationship Andy has with Elsie, his girlfriend back in America, who is portrayed as materialistic and emotionally shallow. Near the end of the novel, when Natasha believes that her relationship with Andy is over, she battles with the desire to claim sick time from work: 'Her machine knew only work. She was human. But she'd not ask off. She wasn't really sick. What was one person's problems?'<sup>54</sup> Natasha does not always find it easy to put the society's needs above hers, but it is something that she ultimately does achieve.

Natasha is forceful and strong, and stands in contrast with many of the other women presented in the novel. Barbara Foley suggests that 'Natasha is noteworthy ... for her uniqueness: from the "hysterical New England spinsters" on the Moscow-bound train ... to the parasitical American wives, to Natasha's superstitious peasant mother, many women in *Moscow Yankee* do not transcend sexist stereotypes.'<sup>55</sup> The novel is full of examples that demonstrate Natasha's character. When Andy first attempts to put his arms around her in Chapter Ten, she slaps a book hard against his cheek. Her ice-skating ability adds to the sense of her general athletic prowess, and while she is helping him skate, Andy is confused by his feelings about her physical strength: 'He marvelled at the power of her grip. Curiously he tested it, bore down harder. A girl had no business with so much strength. Not womanly. Oxen not girls were meant for heavy work. Yet, contrariwise, he liked it.'<sup>56</sup> In Chapter Seventeen he continues to negotiate similar feelings: 'A fellow ought to feel a girl needs, depends on him. Looks up to him sorta. This one was too smart. Too sure of herself. Not a Smart-Alec, though, had to hand her that. Can't get sore at her. Fact is, admit it, you lousy sucker. She's got the goods.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>55</sup> Foley, *Moscow Yankee*, Introduction, xii.

<sup>56</sup> Page, *Moscow Yankee*, 141.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 219-220.

Natasha has 'no frills on her',<sup>58</sup> with nails clipped short, bobbed hair, and machine grease on her face at work. Yet these descriptions of her are juxtaposed with more feminine ones: her swim suit is 'black, close-fitting' and reference is made to her 'firm breasts';<sup>59</sup> Andy describes the 'saucy tilt to her nose' as being the 'cutest thing this side of the Atlantic', and Page makes effective use of a sentence fragment to underline Andy's thoughts about her eyes: while thinking about her, he simply he muses 'And her eyes.'<sup>60</sup> Philip Boardman, the American engineer who is in charge of the die shop, is also struck by her personality: 'Natasha's composure and sunny disposition were reassuring. The girl's energies seemed to flow in organized sure channels.'<sup>61</sup>

Natasha is portrayed as almost being like a warrior and is feted by her fellow workers as a hero when she challenges Zena to a competition in Chapter Fifteen, although in the next paragraph she admits to herself one night at her home that she is 'primping for that American',<sup>62</sup> further evidence of her multi-faceted character. This other side to her personality is revealed again to Andy when he sees the inside of her room: 'Natasha's touch was everywhere. On the windowsill was a flowering plant, set between brightly colored linen curtains. Counterpanes were blue. Now who would have suspected the girl of that!'<sup>63</sup> At the novel's conclusion, Natasha and Andy plan eventually to have children: in stating this fact, Page is completing her portrayal of Natasha as a rounded character who walks between two traditional gender stereotypes. Her physical strength and powerful personality bring to mind Ishma in *Call Home the Heart*, but her maternal desire to one day have children makes this side of her personality more akin to Bonnie in *To Make My Bread*. And her sheer wilfulness and passion undoubtedly suggest Sonya Vrunsky in Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*. But the abiding image of Natasha is her vitality, depicted during a storm thus: 'Like a young birch, she rose stark clean through the gale.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 270.

A strong feminist theme runs throughout *Daughter of the Hills*, a novel which also shares with *Moscow Yankee* Page's claim of veracity: 'When Viking gave me a contract ... the publisher asked me to write Dolly Hawkins and request that she put in writing the verbal permission she had given me years earlier to tell her story: "Sure, write it down. It's all God's truth."<sup>65</sup> Dolly Hawkins was a friend of Page's and a mountain woman, and her depiction in *Daughter of the Hills* serves as an interesting comparison to Page's two other main female protagonists, *Moscow Yankee*'s Natasha and *Gathering Storm*'s Marge. Physically, Dolly is incredibly strong: another character comments early in the novel that 'it ain't right for a girl child to have such strength' and asks: 'What's it mean?'<sup>66</sup> Dolly is brave, too, and willing to physically stand up to aggressive and malicious people, though her actions in doing so are sometimes rash: she pours water over Sal Campbell's head in Chapter Ten when Sal is deliberately rude to her, and she kicks Sal's brother Seth in Chapter Eleven when he directs inappropriate comments and physical contact towards her. Later in the novel, Dolly leads the fight to force the mining company to replace rotting props and therefore improve safety in the mine. She is asked to speak to the community because of 'the fury rising in' her and the memory of her father's leadership when 'routing penitents' from the hills,<sup>67</sup> and this leadership quality is seen throughout: in Chapter Nineteen she stands up feistily to the prejudices of a neighbouring-town's mayor, and in Chapter Twenty-Two she again successfully leads the community in fighting for a pipe so that they can have clean water.

Unlike Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements* or Natasha in *Moscow Yankee*, Dolly chooses to remain a woman who works at home, raising children and caring for her husband, a decision that takes on extra significance when he loses a leg in a mining accident. At this point she is forced to work outside the home: she keeps his spirits up, and even walks for an entire day to find them both work logging in the forests. When her potential boss questions her ability to do the job, she responds: "'I am uncommon strong'" and proves 'it by lifting one of their logs, singlehanded', a

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<sup>65</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 178.

<sup>66</sup> Page, *Daughter of the Hills*, 29.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

feat that is met by the loggers with whistles and claps.<sup>68</sup> She proceeds to work with John in the woods, sawing logs, until the wound on his leg stump becomes too sore for him to continue. Dolly is portrayed as having this immense strength and individuality while at the same time being totally in love with and completely committed to her husband, John. In fact, Deborah Rosenfelt highlights the love between Dolly and John as possibly the most striking element of the novel: 'Perhaps what moves contemporary readers most ... is the quality of feeling between Dolly and John Cooper'.<sup>69</sup>

As with Natasha in *Moscow Yankee*, Page once again presents in Dolly a female character with the physical strength and the mental will to exist and thrive in what are often considered male spheres – the production line of a factory, logging in the forests, leading united action by a community – while at the same time succeeding, or in Natasha's case planning to succeed, in what are often considered female spheres – the raising of children and domestic duties. A belief in free will, demonstrated by Sonya in Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*, is evident in both Natasha and Dolly. Moreover, the merging of male and female attributes, behaviours and roles, and the ability to rise above sexist stereotypes are examples of Page offering hope for a future in which equality between the sexes and fairer treatment of all people might be possible. It also suggests a belief by Page in the notion of gender as a social construct. In *Daughter of the Hills*, there are three separate occasions in which there is mention of change coming – a brighter tomorrow based on fairness and brought about at least in part by education – which is an aspiration shared in the novel by many mountain folk for their children as it is in the Gastonia novels studied in this thesis. Although as much about class as it is gender, this aspiration is especially prevalent among women. Dolly and John's son Cobby is gaining an education at the conclusion of *Daughter of the Hills*, and in *Moscow Yankee* everyone has the opportunity to learn and improve their minds as well as gain new skills. However, while the conditions the characters of *Moscow Yankee* and *Daughter of the Hills* find themselves in are not exactly easy, they are

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>69</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 259.



nothing like as hopeless as those conditions found in Page's Gastonia novel, *Gathering Storm*.

### **Gathering Storm**

Myra Page is unique among the authors being studied here in that she was a member of the Communist Party. It is possibly no surprise to find, therefore, that *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt*, published in 1932 and Page's first novel, is filled with left-wing rhetoric and can feel at times like a political tract. Sylvia Jenkins Cook explains that it is 'a book so ideologically "correct" that it was almost wholly ignored by reviewers to the right of the *New Masses*'.<sup>70</sup> Deborah Rosenfelt picks out some of the flaws that she says are 'commonly associated with the "proletarian novels" of the period: too much rhetoric, too little depth of characterization, too determined a "revolutionary optimism"'.<sup>71</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook goes further in her criticism of the novel: 'The book is a display of virtuosity in including all the proper Party doctrines and giving them life in a wishful vision of the South, but it demands the sacrifice of both the reader's credulity and his right to confront the material with some measure of independence. Thus it remains deservedly the most neglected of a group of little-read books.'<sup>72</sup> Rosenfelt, however, mounts a defence of the novel, pointing to the fact that 'it is all too easy to parody such plots' as those found in *Gathering Storm*,<sup>73</sup> and she uses the doctoral research of Candida Lacey to consider 'a more productive method for reading this and related novels.'<sup>74</sup> She explains how 'Lacey applies a kind of feminist deconstruction to these novels, looking for the ruptures, displacements, and silences in their ostensible narrative projects.'<sup>75</sup> This approach mirrors, to an extent, one of the aims of this thesis, and the issue of gender in the novel will be analyzed here.

*Gathering Storm* has a unique point when compared with the other Gastonia novels studied here: it is the only one not to feature an opening set in the

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<sup>70</sup> Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 118.

<sup>71</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, 254.

<sup>72</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 123.

<sup>73</sup> Rosenfelt, *Daughter of the Hills*, Afterword, 254.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-55.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

mountains.<sup>76</sup> The novel is set in mill towns from the outset, although the two-chapter-long conversation between Ole Marge and Young Marge that begins the story works as a recount of the family's experience when moving "down from the Blue Ridge mountains to the cotton mill"<sup>77</sup> some forty years earlier. This approach to the novel's opening has a significant effect on its focus: *Gathering Storm* is far less a novel about the lifestyle and culture of mountain folk in the hills, their reasons for moving to the towns, and how that lifestyle and culture influenced their response to the stifling industrial conditions that they found when they moved; it is far more a novel about the appalling conditions in the mill towns and an exploration of how through union-led organization, working people can not only improve these conditions but can actually change the economic system that is, according to the novel, the reason for their oppression. Lumpkin's and Burke's novels do also deal with these themes, but in the case of *To Make My Bread*, the engagement with actual politics is vague, while in *Call Home the Heart* the political focus is on the internal struggle within Ishma as she attempts to fully embrace Left political ideas.

As a study of the human condition and as a work of art for its own sake, *Gathering Storm* is judged by most critics as the weakest of the three Gastonia novels featured here. The general sense is that it lacks depth, particularly in its characterization. There is, however, an argument that the novel's fragmented narrative creates a depth of sorts, even if just in the breadth of different characters and circumstances that it attempts to address. With regard to characterization, Jenkins Cook explains the reasons for why she feels the novel is not really a Bildungsroman, and in doing so she highlights a key difference between it and the Gastonia novels of Burke and Lumpkin:

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<sup>76</sup> The fourth Gastonia novel penned by a woman, *Strike!* (1930) by Mary Heaton Vorse, has something of a different structure. In her Introduction to the 1991 University of Illinois Press edition, Dee Garrison explains that the story 'is told from the perspective of two northern journalists', though 'both men represent Vorse at various times in her life.' Garrison explores what she calls 'Vorse's decision to reveal the process of her own intellectual passage through the story of two male journalists': 'as a female labor reporter in a male profession, she realized that speaking through a male reporter would legitimize her views in a way that a woman character could not. Sex-role conflict followed her even into the symbol making central to the writer's work' (xv). This stark fact reinforces the importance of the feminist message in the Gastonia novels being studied here.

<sup>77</sup> Myra Page, *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* (London: Martin Lawrence Limited, 1932), 9. Subsequent references in parenthesis are to this edition.

It is a *Bildungsroman* only in a very limited sense, for there are no reactionary peasants to be converted here but rather a highly class-conscious urban proletariat from the outset. The Crenshaw family, having produced three generations of mill workers, has gradually come to forget the freedom and beauty of a former mountain life and has learned in the mill towns to substitute renewed religious fervor for the other ecstasy that has been abandoned. They are firmly fixed in urban ways, and though they lead a nomadic existence, constantly on the move from one mill hill to the next, they no longer contemplate a life away from the textile factories.<sup>78</sup>

In making this point, Jenkins Cook is somewhat forgetting the harsh reality of mountain life that is so intricately explored in both *Call Home the Heart* and *To Make My Bread*. If 'a life away from the textile mills' means a return to such harsh conditions, it is not really a viable option. This being said, she does make a valid point – Tom Crenshaw's decision to leave the mill village could be seen as the exception that proves the rule.

The harsh conditions experienced in the mountains are referred to by Page in the first chapter of *Gathering Storm* when Ole Marge is recounting the events that led to her and her husband Henry leaving the mountains: "Wal, things is right bad, I admit" is how Henry reacts to the offer of work in the mills (15). It is worth noting, however, that it is Ole Marge's aspiration that her children should have an education that helps sway their decision to leave. Ole Marge is an inspirational character for Young Marge, but the older lady is an individualist, questioning what right the government has to interfere with how they chose to use the corn they grew in the mountains, whether for food, sale, or making into moonshine (13). Young Marge takes the strong, fighting spirit of her grandmother, but in a *Bildungsroman*-style, she learns to think in terms of a planned socialist society.

Despite the high degree of negative criticisms, *Gathering Storm* is not without its merits: it explores the issue of race in far more detail than the other two Gastonia novels here, especially in its attempt to understand the African-American perspective; and, like the other two Gastonia novels, it has much to say about gender, class, and, to an extent, religion; finally, despite the lack of what one might term 'literariness' in the novel, Page does use some powerful and effective imagery to help enforce her point and create a sense of aestheticism. And in defence of

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<sup>78</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 118.

Page's style in the novel, it could be said that she feeds thoughts to the reader in the hope that they will germinate. The same such thoughts and ideas do germinate and grow in the minds of Marge, Tom, and other characters in the book. Page does not appear, however, to be especially concerned with character development; rather, it seems that she uses this style primarily to convey her communist message. That being said, by exploring the experiences and thought processes of a character such as Marge, a sense of that her mind's reasoning in her gradual movement towards left-wing politics is, to an extent, explained, and Page does make it clear that such a shift in political thought occurs because of Marge's life experiences.

### Race in *Gathering Storm*

Paula Rabinowitz highlights Burke and Page as rare examples of 'southern white women authors' who tackle racism in their works.<sup>79</sup> By prominently featuring a number of black characters and by setting parts of the novel in Back Row, the black neighbourhood of Greenville, Myra Page foregrounds race relations in a way that no other Gastonia novel does. In doing so, it could be argued that she fills the novel with more stereotypes because with this increased cast she leaves herself with less space to develop characters and explore their psyche. This increased characters list also widens the scope of the novel, which in turn leads to even less focus on any one point within it. On the other hand, in attempting to understand the lives of the mill town black folk, who are even more oppressed than the poor whites, Page does attempt to provide a fuller picture of mill town life. Moreover, by focusing on the relations between the black and white community, Page is painting a fuller picture of life in mill towns than would otherwise be the case. At the same time, she raises a challenge to the stereotypes of black people that pervaded American society at the time, though ironically in doing so she emphasises the stereotyping of white workers of which she is arguably guilty. However, with the inclusion of black characters, Page makes a crucial point, echoing one made by the Communist Party: without racial unity, unionizing the South effectively would be a near-impossible task.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 174.

<sup>80</sup> See the 'Gastonia' section of the Introduction.

The sections of *Gathering Storm* that depict life in Back Row are haunting in their brutal presentation of how life was for African Americans at that time. In Chapter Nine, Page expresses the banal side of that existence: ‘As Aunt Polly Johnson puts it, “Jes’ workin’, bornin’, courtin’, marryin’, dyin’, ‘n more workin’,” that was life at Back Row, varied sometimes by singing in the dusk and dancing to Uncle Ben’s banjo’ (117). This description has many echoes of how poor white mill town communities are described in all Gastonia novels. Later in the same chapter, entitled ‘Lynch Terror’, Page presents the horror of Martha’s rape and murder and the subsequent lynch mob attack on Back Row; this attack comes in retaliation for the killing by Jim of Elbert Haines, the main perpetrator of Martha’s rape and murder. The depiction of the rape is visceral, as is the description of the black community’s helplessness in face of the lynch mob sent out after Jim avenges his girlfriend’s murder: ‘What could thirty adults and five shot guns do against a wrecking mob of several hundred whites, reinforced by the law? One or two hot-heads were for fighting it out, “But thar’d be no fair fight, jest a massacare,” the others retorted angrily’ (131). Paula Rabinowitz believes that that ‘in this case, rape becomes a constitutive element of (black) female subjectivity within the race, class, and gender relations of the South’,<sup>81</sup> and in this way Page is presenting a horrific incident that epitomizes what she is attempting to do in the whole text: combine many themes together. The rape scene is one of the few occasions on which she successfully manages to achieve this intention.

The combining of different themes in the rape and lynching scenes is underlined by Rabinowitz when she states that ‘Page portrays rape as more than a symbol of class conflict’; she then explains that ‘it becomes symptomatic of the racial and gender differences inscribed on the body of the working-class black woman.’<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Rabinowitz asserts that ‘Page ties the politics of rape to white supremacy when Jim, Martha’s lover, is lynched for her murder after he attacks the white men to avenge her death.’<sup>83</sup> The point Rabinowitz makes here is a valid one, and further explores how Page is successful in this part of the novel at linking

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<sup>81</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 90.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

together themes in a way that adds depth to her writing. However, Rabinowitz's take on events is rather inaccurate. Jim is not hunted by the mob for the murder of Martha but for having murdered Haines in a revenge attack because Haines raped and murdered Martha; members of the family are then brutally murdered by the mob, but Jim robs 'the mob of their prey' (134) by turning his last bullet on himself, defiantly calling out, "'You'll never hang this nigger'" (134). Page presents Jim as a strong character who acts bravely in the face of impossible odds and death, but Jim dies in isolation, and the sickening scenes in Chapter Nine serve to add weight to Page's overall point that only by working together can poor people, black and white, overcome their oppression.

Building on her presentation of the black community, Page later features an exchange in the black part of Riverton, known as the Hollow, in which Uncle John tells George that 'here.... when they wants men to work their roads, the white folks just to out 'n arrest the strongest-lookin' black ones they can find' (269). The scenes portrayed in these parts of *Gathering Storm* could come from any number of novels written by African-American authors, and they also mirror historical events, a fact which only adds to their horror.

Despite the diffusion of focus that it causes, the inclusion of black characters does add to the novel in a number of ways. Crucially, Page is making it clear that there are workers worse off than the poor whites. She also makes it clear that the racism and rivalry between black and poor white workers keeps both groups oppressed, with Tom stating the fact that "'this race prejudice stands in the way of southern workers more than anything else'" (297). Finally, by creating strong, independent black characters like Fred Morgan, Sol, and George, Page subverts the racist stereotypes and attitudes that lead to a belief that black people, or any people in a weak social or economic position, require the help of white people, or someone from the dominant social or economic class, to raise them up from their lowly status. Page is also positing the idea that communism can be the uniting force that provides independence to all people, regardless of their class, race, or gender. The friendship between Tom and Fred, and that between Tom and George, clearly demonstrates the potential for Southern men from both sides of the racial divide to come together. The friendship forged between George and Sol has a similar effect,

though perhaps to a lesser extent: they may both be black, but they both believe for a time that the races can work together, even though Sol eventually joins a black organisation and dies 'fightin' for the freedom of his people' (215) while George continues to work towards a racially integrated communist future.

Page also presents the racism of the poor white community as being different in its nature from that seen in *To Make My Bread*: in *Gathering Storm* it is less ingrained. There is the same almost casual, everyday racism in the language used by poor whites; the narrator, for example, speaking about the size of one of the larger houses of the town, voices Marge's thoughts: 'No wonder it took five darkies to keep it going' (36). But while in Lumpkin's work, Grandpap is proud of having fought for the Confederacy, in part to help retain white supremacy, in *Gathering Storm*, Henry Marlow, Marge Crenshaw's late grandfather, fought for the Union, and in Ole Marge's recollections of his not wanting to leave the mountains, he has a less aggressive, though still loathsome, form of racism: "'I ain't calculating on messin' up with the niggers. I fite to help git 'em free, for no man, white or black, should live in slavery. But I doan want to live near 'em. They brings bad luck'" (15). Such viewpoints expose the limits of this form of liberalism; they also emphasise that although less vicious than some, these attitudes are still intolerable.

The younger characters of *Gathering Storm* also display none of the internal battles that Ishma goes through in an attempt to cast off the racism within her; in fact, in Page's book, Marge and Tom Crenshaw change a lifetime's viewpoint with relative ease. In Tom's case, Jake teaches him that class loyalty can override the racism of his upbringing: upbraiding Scott, with Tom listening on, Jake thunders, "'A worker's a worker, no matter what's the color of his skin. Shore, I got over your ailment years ago. Southerner! Bosh! What difference does it make what part of the country you come from. What'd Dixie ever do for you, to make you so patriotic? Lotta hard work 'n ignorance, that's all'" (81). Tom is temporarily 'torn by conflicting emotions and ideas' after Fred Morgan risks his own life to save him, but he soon befriends Fred, a friendship that Page uses to demonstrate that people can leave their prejudices behind. However, Tom's 'conversion', while far from unfeasible, has less impact on the reader than Ishma's conversion in *To Make My Bread* and *A Stone Came Rolling* because Burke devotes so much more attention to Ishma's state of

mind. Yet having said this, even in Burke's texts there is no direct explanation as to how Ishma finally overcomes her prejudices in the way she appears to have done between the end of *Call Home the Heart* and the start of *A Stone Came Rolling*.

In spite of the difficulties that it causes in relation to the novel's focus, Page's analysis of the issue of race in relation to southern mill towns and her attempt to present the issue from the perspective of both the black and white communities is a commendable inclusion in her writing.

### Religion in *Gathering Storm*

Religion does not feature as heavily in *Gathering Storm* as it does in other Gastonia novels, but it is discussed from the same position, which is that the type of religion to which the poor whites are exposed in mill towns plays a large part in convincing them to accept their oppression and not fight against it. In Chapter Seventeen, 'local pastors' go 'from house to house counselling the villagers' during a strike, but their message is not one of support for the strike: "'My poor people, your feelin's misled you. You've struck the hand that feeds you. Go back, while thar is still time'", (225) they say. When Ole Marge suggests that there may be no God down in the mill villages, 'Sal nearly ...[drops] the applesauce in her astonishment' and tells Ole Marge that she's blaspheming. In saying what she does, Marge is also speaking out against the way the mill system operates: "'I kin quote scriptures as long as any of 'em ... but I doan know how come they kin make it out God's plan, the way these mills is run. Seems like we done left God back up in them mountains. He doan feel at home in these here villages, the way they is, now'" (37). In some respects, Page presents religion in a more negative light than other Gastonia novelists. There is a suggestion in Chapter Eight that a revivalist preacher who comes to town might be acting in a sexually inappropriate manner: when he puts his arms around Marge, she 'involuntarily ... drew back'; the preacher continues to seek her out on subsequent nights, and she notices that 'he made a practice of bringing comfort to the young girls'; Marge is 'frightened at her half-formed thought' and keeps 'away from the remaining services' (105), leaving the reader with the same half-formed idea about the intentions of the preacher. Marge also questions why the poor should be paying such visiting preachers: 'Why should mill



folks, who had so little, deny their little ones to make presents to that huggin' pastor? He and his family were lots better off than anybody on Row Hill ever would be' (106). A story also later emerges that this particular preacher 'had gotten into trouble with a young girl' (106), a story which Sal refuses to believe while Marge is somewhat inclined to accept it as true.

Unlike other Gastonia novels, *Gathering Storm* focuses not only on how poor whites interact with religion but also on the religion practised by the black community in the mill towns. One way in which Page does this by highlighting the singing of the spiritual song 'Let My People Go':

Go down, Moses,  
 'Way down in Egypt land,  
 Tell ole Pharaoh,  
 To let ma people go (61).

Marge hears this song one evening as a 'faint echo ... as it floated across the fields from Back Row to Row Hill' (61). 'When the last martial note' dies away, Martha comments that it's "'the best song we got'", to which Pa Morgan adds that it's the "'truest'" because "'Moses lead the chillen of Israel, 'n we needs somebody to lead us'" (61). Marge hears the song in the mills and it moves her deeply (73). Fred Morgan is singing its refrain when Tom goes to tell him the news of his sister's rape and murder. But in Chapter Twenty, entitled 'New Times—New Songs', George discovers an African-American community in which he hears new songs that contain a more hopeful message. They come only after he has listened to some of the 'the same old songs.... the same bonds of outcast and down-trodden holdin', bindin' 'em all' (267), but the words of one of them, 'Brother stand by brother' (271), cause George to jump up and seize the singer by the shoulder in excitement at what the song means, at the message it contains.

Although this use of songs is as didactic and heavy-handed as the other themes and ideas in *Gathering Storm*, the image created by the singing of 'Let My People Go' is powerful, and Page uses it to draw an interesting parallel between the poor white and black communities of mill towns: it is only when they throw off the shackles of their old religion, in whatever guise that takes, that they can create the

conditions to change their circumstances and rise out of their oppression. In fact, she is saying that in order to actually gain the freedom for which the Israelites in 'Let My People Go' are calling, the black community needs to reject that song and take up singing newer, more revolutionary ones. In other words, they need to move away from Pa Morgan's hope that an individual might come and lead them and move towards the revolutionary fervour that George feels on hearing a song about the black community standing together to fight for change.

### Class in *Gathering Storm*

As far as there is any one central theme in *Gathering Storm*, it is the plight of working-class factory hands. Page's earlier factual work *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor* provided a rich source material for *Gathering Storm*, and Wes Mantooth explains Page's thinking behind the use of the term 'Poor White':

Page had an economic-derived belief that mountain culture was never truly independent of the currents shaping America's economic development.... Further, outside of the mountains, in contexts where capitalist interests exploit their labor, all white wage and tenant labourers, regardless of background, are equally "stigmatized" by and "set off from the rest of the southern population" (Southern 35). Thus, Page's sociological study and her *Gathering Storm* both use the term "Poor White" ... to highlight the idea that poverty creates profound cultural links among a broad and geographically diverse segment of the white population.<sup>84</sup>

Mantooth's point serves to highlight how much potential there was for *Gathering Storm* to really explore and analyse the lives of Poor Whites; however, the disjointed narrative of the novel means that even this crucial theme is examined only through short passages that feel like snapshots never fully developed. The characters themselves add to this sense: at times they feel like stereotypes that have no deeper dimensions to their personalities. A discussion of stereotypes is of course problematic because they are by their nature based on anecdotal observations and supported by suppositions. Myra Page lived among working people in much the same way as John Steinbeck did, and the anecdotal evidence gathered from such middle-class observations of the working class is recoded in their work. Anecdotal evidence is not necessarily objective, but despite not being forced to permanently

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<sup>84</sup> Mantooth, *You Factory Folks*, 24-5.

endure the tough lives that their characters live, writers like Page and Steinbeck did experience life among the people about whom they write, and this social research gives their writing some anchoring in lived social realities. The problem in *Gathering Storm* is that no situation is ever given enough space to develop, leaving the reader almost with a sense of having read a collection of newspaper or magazine articles. This is true also of the characters: they are not given the opportunity to display a variety of facets to their personalities, and when their attitudes change, there is no explanation of the process that led to that change.

Two different senses of aspiration among the working class are touched upon in *Gathering Storm*: the aspiration to acquire an education, and the aspiration to acquire material goods. The strong character of Ole Marge rejects the old saying of 'once a mill hand, always a mill hand' and tells Young Marge that "'a smart gal like you deserves an ejection 'n a chance'" (10). In fact, it is Young Marge herself who questions her grandmother about why she should not be working in the mills at the age of fourteen, which is, as she points out, a more advanced age than that at which many young workers start. There is a distinct difference here from the opinions towards education found in *Call Home the Heart*, in which Ishma battles to get an education while those around her question its value. But this idea of aspiration is not developed extensively in the *Gathering Storm*. Tom does eventually realise that education is important, but it would seem that the only books worth reading are Marxist texts about the economic order.

The aspiration to acquire material goods is not as evident in *Gathering Storm* as it is in the Gastonia novels of Burke and Lumpkin because *Gathering Storm* does not feature an opening set in the hills with the attendant lack of the items and goods possessed by those living in towns. It should be noted that these are goods that the Western world today would view as basic and possibly essential items. The description of the parlor room in the Crenshaw house points to their high hopes for a better quality of life:

The parlor was a room set apart, dedicated to the high dreams and frustrated hopes that Sal, Gertie, and the rest had of a nobler life—of "livin' like we was a-somebody, 'stead of jest millhands." It was hallowed by years of scrimping and planning that had made it possible (40).

Page describes the contents of the room – ‘its crayon, life-sized drawing of Pa on the wall, its Family Bible, its two horse-hair-covered chairs, and wheezy organ’ – and in the context of the Crenshaw’s lives there is pathos in these lines, but there is no sense of negativity or sneering; instead, there is a sense of the pride that the Crenshaws have, and an insight into their belief in the culture of which they are a part: this is emphasized in particular by the presence of the Bible. Throughout *Gathering Storm*, Page posits that all people should be able to enjoy the fruits of the economy and live lives with a balance between work and pleasure; the description of the parlour room acts to support this position by demonstrating at least some of the mill workers’ dream and desires. Ultimately, though, the narrative here yet again moves on from this portrait of the house’s interior, leaving the impression that the picture of the working class is never quite fully painted. An alternative interpretation is that Page is leaving space for the reader to use his or her own imagination: the gaps are perhaps deliberate, demonstrating a possible reluctance on Page’s part to appear as if she is instructing the reader’s thoughts. This notion is an interesting thought even if though contrasts with the more generally held view that the novel is too didactic.

#### Gender in *Gathering Storm*

It has been mentioned a number of times that the attempt by Myra Page to focus on so many different issues in *Gathering Storm* causes the whole novel to feel diffused, and this is perhaps most evident in its treatment of women. There are strong female characters, perhaps none more so than Ole Marge, but the novel has nothing like the feminist theme of *Call Home the Heart*; moreover, there is far less analysis of life for poor women in *Gathering Storm* than there is in Page’s *Daughter of the Hills*. And although the context of *Moscow Yankee* is extremely different, it too presents a more positive image of women, particularly in the fact that it presents the sexes as potentially being on an equal footing.

There are of course some valid reasons for the less positive representation of women in *Gathering Storm*. There is the potential that a reader will identify more easily with a downtrodden and oppressed woman than they might be able to with a character such as Dolly, who is in some regards almost a kind of ‘superwoman’.

Moreover, one of Page's points is that poor women had no access to contraception and were therefore saddled with multiple children, the care of whom they were unable to undertake effectively because of their lack of finance, the long hours they were forced to work in the mills, and the poor quality of the housing that the mill owners provided for them. In fact, in the opening few pages of the novel Marge tosses her head back indignantly and, in an echo of Ishma in *Call Home the Heart*, states, "'No string of 'lil' uns fer me'" in response to Ole Marge's suggestion that she'll have trouble being such a "'great one for neatness'" once she has "'a string of lil' uns a taggin' afta ... [her], to feed'n clothe, on top of wokin' at the mill'" (11). In this exchange, Page sets out the position that most poor working women face, and she also indicates the acceptance with which this position is met: "'Doan be so sure, missie. What the Lord sends, he sends'" (11) is Ole Marge's retort to Marge's defiance. This again emphasises the role of religion in creating compliance among poor working people, who fall back on their religious belief rather than questioning their situation in life.

Despite her intentions as a younger woman, Marge does go on to become a working mother. In another reflection of Ishma's story in *Call Home the Heart*, Marge's independence is returned to her not only by the death of her children (or child in Ishma's case) but, unlike Ishma, her husband as well. (Ishma's husband Britt dies very late in the second of Burke's two novels and she is by then already living the life she wishes to live.) Page presents this turn of events as an emancipation for Marge, which given the tragedy of what has occurred might seem somewhat harsh; however, Page portrays it this way to enforce her point: conditions for poor women are awful to such an extreme degree that there is hope provided by death.

In Chapter Three, before he leaves the family to go north, an eighteen-year-old Tom verbalizes his sense that somehow it is acceptable for poor women to be in the place they are, but that a man needs more. By way of representation, Page would appear to be suggesting that these are views held more widely by men in general. Before leaving, Tom points to the emptiness of the family's existence, consisting as it does of "'Workin', eatin', sleepin', 'n mo' workin'"; he notes that "'Granny knows'", but then asserts that "'thar's nuthin' hyar fer a *man* to do!" (44). In response to his question of how Granny has "'stood it all these year'", Granny asks

'dryly', "'What else was thar to do?'"', to which Tom answers, "'I guess it's different fer wimen'" (44). His reason for thinking so is never explained, and it is a fault of the novel that Tom's conversion to believing in equality between races and, to a lesser extent, men and women, is never explored: it just happens and is presented as being simply a fact that the reader must accept. Tom appears to move from a position where he is 'ashamed' to work at a fish canning plant because he and his companion, Scott, discover that the plant 'was manned largely by women and children' (77), to one where he believes in equality between the sexes. However, although its subject matter is never properly developed, the exchange between the young Tom and his sister and grandmother in Chapter Three is important because of what it demonstrates: despite her adherence to Communist Party line in this novel, Page retains an interest in the position of women and presents at least some feminist themes. Yet it is in part the lack of development of such themes that prevents *Gathering Storm* being viewed more positively as a feminist text.

Laura Hapke believes that the novel does paint a positive view of women in the revolutionary movement, positing that Page 'infused *Gathering Storm* with more optimism about female militance than ... Lumpkin by employing a pair of Ella May figures. One is the Wiggins of approved legend, the other her fictional protégé, the Communism-imbibing protagonist Marge Crenshaw'.<sup>85</sup> Hapke also points to the militancy of other female characters: 'Old Marge, a prime mover in a textile strike of the 1890s; Ella Ramsey, a veteran of the Concord, North Carolina, strike of 1921; and, in the closing pages, the brave new Communist woman of the Soviet Council of Moscow'.<sup>86</sup> Yet simply featuring these characters is not enough. They become almost like statistics and facts, unexplained, undeveloped, not understood. Hapke's assertion that the novel is more optimistic about female militancy than *To Make My Bread* may be true, but it pales in its analysis of this militancy when compared with *Call Home the Heart*, and it fails to suggest a way forward for women in the manner that *Salome of the Tenements* does. In fact, as Hapke points out, 'the final section of the novel sees both a passing of the feminine torch and comradeship with a

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<sup>85</sup> Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 163.

<sup>86</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 163-4.

masculine role model',<sup>87</sup> by whom she means Tom. Moreover, she suggests that one possible future for Marge is 'marriage to the movement á lá Clara Weatherwax's good comrade Mary, who "walks almost like a man" and finds no clash between her service to the movement and her feminine home roles after work.'<sup>88</sup> These conclusions do not offer an especially positive answer to the question of where women fit into the idealised communist system, but they do echo a feminist model popular at the time: a model in which women become more like men. This is a long way from Cixous's ideal of women finding a women's voice. Furthermore, Hapke concludes that Marge's future is problematic: 'Marge is left alive, not to be Ella May redivivus but to form part of a new society of men and women modeling themselves on comradely Soviets. No less than in other Gastonia novels, the South is a problematic place in which to be an educated woman militant. Page offers, however unwittingly, only two solutions: relocation or death.'<sup>89</sup>

Marge understands well the relative positions of men and women, envying Tom's adventure in the north with the thought, "'Wisht I could go'", and concluding that "'it's easier fer boys'" (76). Her understanding of the position in which society places women is further explored in her attitude towards sex: 'a forbidden, evil thing, that got you in the corner, and cursed you with extra mouths to feed (102). While Marge later feels 'a fierce resentment' towards the 'added burden' (174) of her own pregnancy, she is presented as not alone in this thought process: her sister Gertie, on noticing the nascent pregnancy, states that Marge is "'caught'" (175). With no access to decent medical care or advice, 'Marge hardly ... [knows] where to turn for aid' (175) and recalls women who have died or almost died attempting to perform abortions on themselves using 'a long carrot, shaved down at one end to a sharp point' or 'a hairpin straightened out to full length' (175). Page explains that 'everybody knew how the rich city women kept from having kids.... and if it came to the worst, there were doctors who'd operate, if you were influential and had money' (176). The assertion that 'everybody knew how the rich city women kept from having kids' is apparently at odds with the suggestion by Burke in *Call Home*

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 166.

*the Heart* that working class women were uneducated about contraceptive techniques; indeed, Ishma is interested to learn about them from Derry. However, Page does suggest an explanation when, in Chapter Nineteen, Ruthie asks her older sister Marge “‘how ... that is ... do you know how ...?’” and Marge responds “‘Naw, I doan. I wisht I did. It’d saved me’n Bob a lotta sufferin’” (246). The inference is that the rich know and use a method of contraception about which the poor do not know and therefore cannot use.

During the exchange between Gertie and Marge, Gertie uses the euphemistic term ‘caught’ as a pessimistic substitute for ‘pregnant’. The notion of pregnancy as a negative event haunts Marge even though her first child Roberta, who dies young, ‘awakened in her’ ‘a longing for motherhood’ (196); when Marge and Bob are talking about having another child, ‘the old doubt assailed her’ (196). These examples emphasise the difficulties facing a poor young woman who wants more from life than to serve only as a reproduction machine, for the option of having both motherhood and a life beyond being a mother was available to middle- and upper-class women but not to the poor. Page is also demonstrating a depth of personality in Marge, whose mind is divided as to precisely what she wants out of life.

Through her exploration of poor women’s feelings and attitudes towards pregnancy and child-rearing, Page is touching on feminist themes, but once more they are not developed. These examples do, however, show how Page portrays the desperation that some working women felt when confronted with pregnancy. She also emphasizes that it is not an issue that affects all women, but rather one that is peculiar to poor women only. An important point is being made here: gender and class issues intersect a great deal and cannot always be viewed in isolation.

The focus on Ella May Wiggins towards the end of the novel does introduce another strong female character. Echoing historical accounts, Page positions Ella May as an inspirational figure, introducing her as a ‘brown-skinned, dusky-eyed woman whose slight frame vibrated energy to all around her’ and stating that once Marge ‘had heard Ella May sing’, she ‘felt drawn to this woman’ (303). Mention is also immediately made of Ella May’s ‘four young-uns’ (303), emphasizing her role as a mother and adding authenticity to her ballad, ‘How it hurts the heart of a mother’ (303). And during the strike, Page explains that ‘for the mill hands this tiny woman



had come to symbolize the will to win' (335). Having a female character as the symbol of the workers' fight is a strong feminist statement, but in keeping with the historical events, Ella May is murdered and her killers are never brought to justice. There is a certain parallel between the killing of Ella May and the killing of Martha: in both cases, white southern men have no hesitation in killing a woman to serve their own purpose. One woman is black, the other white, but they both share a common trait: they are poor.

Despite the inclusion of Ella May Wiggins, her character does not feature prominently in the overall scheme of *Gathering Storm*. This contrasts with Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* in which, by positioning Bonnie as the Ella May figure, Lumpkin explores and develops the role in far greater detail. And Marge appears almost weak and ineffective compared with the characters of Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements* and Ishma in *To Make My Bread*. Hapke's assertion that Marge is somehow Ella May's protégé does not feel supported by the novel itself. Marge does share with Ishma an inspirational, feisty and somewhat feminist grandmother, Ole Marge being described by Jenkins Cook as 'a formidable matriarch reminiscent of Ishma's Granny Starkweather';<sup>90</sup> she also shares with Ishma an unfulfilled desire not to have children, but whereas in *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling*, Ishma is central to what occurs in the novel, in *Gathering Storm* Marge is subsumed by her brother Tom and by wider events, and only at the conclusion is there a feeling that she could now be 'riding the gale' and marshalling 'the gathering storm'.

Jenkins Cook feels that Marge

is little more than a mouthpiece for all the generalized problems of the poor white woman and an unquestioning receptacle for the teachings of Sinclair, Marx, and Bellamy. In many ways she invites comparison with Fielding Burke's Ishma—determining like her to resist marriage and childbearing but being early trapped by a man not unlike Britt; ultimately she is freed again of her husband and all her children by their deaths in mill-related tragedies. Marge's marriage is depicted not so much as the triumph of emotion or desire over reason (as Ishma's is) but rather as an event wholly determined by the circumstances of her life.<sup>91</sup>

The circumstances of which Jenkins Cook writes are that Marge's life is viewed by the mill owners and the economic system as non-essential; she can simply be

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<sup>90</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 118.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

replaced in the factory by another 'non-essential' worker, and what happens to her in life outside the mill does not appear to give any concern to the owners of the mills. In this respect, the character of Marge, affected as she is by fate and circumstance, represents the many women in her position. Jenkins Cook's view supports the idea that Marge is not as powerful or inspiring a figure as Ishma. Marge appears to be far more at the mercy of circumstance than Ishma, a strong female character who at least attempts to control her own fate and who learns about herself and about human emotions along the way. Yet in saying this it must be remembered that at the conclusion of *Gathering Storm* Marge is seen to be taking control of her destiny as she seeks to become a part of the titular gathering storm.

Page does feature instances of women's involvement in the strike, such as the interaction they have with the National Guard. In an echo of *To Make My Bread*, women use the culture's patriarchal dominance against the soldiers, almost taunting them: Miz Crane asks, "'You think you actin' right, totin' guns 'n baynits against women 'n chillen'" and Marge challenges the soldiers' intentions: "'You guardsmen ain't aimin' to run one of them baynits in an old 'oman on the picket line?'" (294). There is, however, never quite the same sense of anger from these women as that which is seen in *To Make My Bread*: in that novel Ora boldly challenges Young Frank to kill her, which leaves him unsure of how to react and represents a victory for Ora.

Although Page does engage with what is often termed 'the woman question' in *Gathering Storm*, her interaction with it feels like it is following the Party line: the woman question will be dealt with properly after the revolution. She does not focus her Gastonia novel on one woman, but neither does Grace Lumpkin. Yet Lumpkin presents stronger, more powerful female characters who are less likely to passively accept unjust situation. Scenes like that in *To Make My Bread* in which Emma McClure stands with a shotgun to face Sam McEachern are lacking in *Gathering Storm*, evidence that Page's novel does not have as much focus on portraying feminist role models as is found in her other 1930s literature or in the Gastonia novels of Burke and Lumpkin.

### Imagery in *Gathering Storm*

*Gathering Storm* features far less imagery than Page's other 1930s novel set in the United States, *Daughter of the Hills*, which refers continually and symbolically to the mountain named High Top. And of the works studied in this thesis, *Gathering Storm* includes the least amount of imagery, a fact which stands to reason given that of these novels it has the most openly propagandist elements and is the least literary in terms of the writing style and the effect of both the language and the narrative. Jenkins Cook develops this point about the propagandist elements of *Gathering Storm*:

That Page's purpose is propaganda is further apparent from the didactic tone of the narrative, which never fails to spell out the morals clearly implicit in the incidents, e.g., "Everyday, while their elders were at work in the mill, unknown to them, two tow heads and two kinky ones would spend happy hours along the creek's bank, floating boats on its muddied waters or sliding down its inviting slopes" (69). This description makes its point, albeit rather sentimentally, but Page adds, "For children, like nature, know no color line. Humans are humans to them. Of race and caste they know nothing and care less, until their elders, out of their worldly wisdom, take them in hand" (69). When the inevitable separation of the friendship comes, she adds to its pathos. "Something ugly and mean, dimly comprehended but deeply emotional, entered their souls and tainted their breath" (71).<sup>92</sup>

There is a contradiction here, though, because the quote that Jenkins Cook uses, 'something ugly and mean, dimly comprehended but deeply emotional', does not feel particularly didactic; in fact, it is almost mystical and certainly leaves the reader to consider just what this 'something' might be.

There are examples of imagery in *Gathering Storm* that serve to heighten the sense of power that the mill, the mill owners and the rich in general have over the poor. The mill is described in the opening paragraph of the novel as looming behind the houses in which the workers live and 'standing as if on guard' (9); later, when a working shift begins, the 'old red brick building' begins 'to rumble like some hungry beast' (64). Early in the novel, Marge dreams about millions of flies sucking at her blood; 'to Marge's horror, the flies [change] ... into the faces of the boss spinner, and the super, and the mill owner's family' (48-49), and as Marge swats them away, she dreams that Tom kills the mill superintendent by throwing a Bible at him. The use of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 120.

so many flies in this image inverts the idea of the working class as a monolithic mass which the rich can treat in the way they are seen to in the novel; in Marge's dream, she is very much an individual and the flies, representing the rich, are the uniform mass. In contrast, towards the end of the novel Page includes images that suggest the potential power that the workers could wield if they continue to organise. Chapter Twenty-Two, entitled 'Solidarity Forever', sees the workers involved in a mass meeting; at one point, Tom is speaking while 'the sun dipped behind the trees, shadows stretching like straggling giants on the grass' (304). The alliteration draws the reader's attention to the image of giants, and Page's suggestion of what the workers could become is clear.

Page builds upon this notion of how the workers can take control of their own destinies and improve the quality of their lives through the image of storms and Marge's desire for one to occur. In Chapter Eighteen, Marge and Bob take a rare vacation to the mountains in an attempt to restore Bob's health, and while there Marge says that she hopes "'it storms just once, jest once, afore I go'" (232). Bob asks her why, and is confused by her answer: 'Oh, I doan know. Granny told me about how the thunder 'n lightnin' goes rumblin' 'n' rollickin' down the mountains. Houses shiver 'n trees are pulled out by the roots.'" It is clear that Marge longs for something to break the exhausting monotony of her life, and at this point she evokes the idea of nature being able to do that. In her desire to gain some connection with nature, Marge also evinces a personality trait faintly redolent of Ishma in *Call Home the Heart*. In the novel's final lines, Marge feels a part of the storm: 'Marge.... was riding the gale! Not swept along, but deliberately, joyously a fore-runner, a marshaller of the gathering storm' (374). This is a bellicose, hopeful conclusion, not quite triumphant because the storm is yet to strike, but filled with a sense that the workers have taken control of their destiny, and almost of nature itself, and can now control the storm that will see them become giants and bring their communist vision into reality.

These images are powerful, especially the simple yet effective idea of Marge wishing for a storm and then learning that she can help to create it. Yet there is a limited amount of imagery in *Gathering Storm* and at least in the symbolic sense it is not a novel laden with multi-layered levels of meaning.

## Conclusion

### A Comparison between Page the Other Authors Being Used in this Thesis

Written as it is by the only card-carrying communist of the authors being studied here, the fact that *Gathering Storm* appears to be the most obviously propagandist of the novels that have been discussed, certainly in the sense of what A. P. Foulkes describes as 'authoritarian vertical propaganda',<sup>93</sup> is a perhaps an unsurprising fact. It is, however, a fact that supports the general sense that the Communist Party USA, and its literary wing as led by characters such as Mike Gold, was monolithic in its approach. In particular, the novel concurs with the view that the question of gender equality was for communists secondary to the revolutionary cause of overthrowing capitalism. This is made evident in *Gathering Storm* through its focus, which is mostly concerned with class and race issues; relatively little time is given to dealing with the question of how equality for women could be achieved. Yet in Page's other two nineteen-thirties novels, especially *Daughter of the Hills*, she displays a writing style that is more likely to engage the reader and one that studies human emotion in a far more detailed and nuanced manner. Page achieves this in *Moscow Yankee*, though that novel has in its themes and narrative a didactic tone linked to the ideological basis of the story; even so, in it Page does analyse and develop the characters of Andy and Natasha to some extent, which gives the novel some sense of being about human beings and their reactions to a political system.

John M. Bradbury distinguishes between Page's nineteen-thirties novels as well, though his thoughts on the subject differ from those posited here: 'Miss Page ... is frankly Communist in *Gathering Storm* (1932), a mill story involving both black and white workers, and in *Moscow Yankee* (1935). She is merely liberal in her life story of a miner's daughter, *With Sun in Our Blood*<sup>94</sup> (1950).'<sup>95</sup> Bradbury, however, dedicates little time in *Renaissance in the South* to the Gastonia novels, and his dismissal of the works of Page (and the other Gastonia writers) imply that he is a critic with a certain agenda, one not supportive of anything remotely considered left

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<sup>93</sup> A. P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 41.

<sup>94</sup> *Daughter of the Hills* was first published under the title *With Sun in Our Blood*.

<sup>95</sup> John M. Bradbury, *Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920 – 1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 157.

wing. It is clear also that he fails to read beyond the didacticism of *Moscow Yankee* and consider any of its deeper implications.

The fact that Page's later novels seem to include more subtleties is hard to account for. She was certainly still actively involved in the communist movement when she wrote *Moscow Yankee*, and it can only be supposed that the passing of a few years allowed her to develop and improve her writing technique. Also, *Gathering Storm* is based around the Gastonia strikes, which were reported on by the mainstream media in a particularly one-sided, unsympathetic manner; Page may well have been trying to redress this imbalance, and in doing so produced a novel that reads as somewhat propagandist. Moreover, she was attempting to include too much in the novel. This attempt by Myra Page to address so many themes in *Gathering Storm* proves ultimately to be its greatest failure. Page herself later accepted this fact, stating, 'Now, I would modify *Gathering Storm* a great deal. My own criticism is that it tries to encompass too much.'<sup>96</sup> The focus is diffused, and despite the avoidance of literary language in an attempt at producing something 'realistic', the fragmented narrative, lack of character development and lack of plot detail results in a novel which perhaps lacks a sense of authenticity, problematic as this term can be. It feels somewhat contrived, and as already stated, gives a sense of being propagandist in a top-down, vertical form, written to follow the Communist Party line. When Foulkes describes 'modern critics ... whose evaluative criteria would lead them to make a distinction between "real literature" and "tendentious" writing',<sup>97</sup> *Gathering Storm* could easily fall into the latter category, though defining what this means is another question all together. Good and bad are such subjective, value-laden terms that their use in this instance would be futile.

Page follows the style of what Mike Gold termed 'Proletarian Realism', which, according to Alice Kessler-Harris and Paul Lauter, 'would ... deal in plain, crisp language with the lives and especially the work of the proletariat, optimistically urging them on "through the maze of history toward Socialism and the classless society."<sup>98</sup> Simple, direct language and style has been used famously and effectively

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<sup>96</sup> Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 116.

<sup>97</sup> Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris and Paul Lauter in *Daughter of the Hills*, Introduction, xi.

by writers like Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel, to name but three; it is used less famously but equally effectively by Ron Kovic in his autobiographical novel *Born on the Fourth of July*, in which at one point he states 'Sergeant Bo was my friend and now he was dead'<sup>99</sup> to express a simple yet almost unutterable truth. But in *Gathering Storm*, the simplicity of the language is overlaid with continual, didactic overtones that distract from any sense of the novel conveying a multilayered reflection of reality.

Foulkes' point that 'realism, like fictionality, is a fluctuating category of reception'<sup>100</sup> succinctly explains that realism can be an ambiguous term. To a reader in the early part of the twenty-first century, Page's writing in *Gathering Storm* does perhaps lack a sense of realism, and this is indeed the point that Foulkes is making: such judgements about realism are very much fluctuating categories of reception. Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* to a degree shares the problem of the extent to which a modern reader, and perhaps a reader of the nineteen-thirties, will be willing to believe in the realism of the novel. Of course words like 'believe' can sound vague, but if Page and Lumpkin are presenting a message in their writing, a reader must have some belief in what is being presented in that writing if she or he is to hear or respond to that message. *To Make My Bread* is somewhat over-simplified, at times didactic, and arguably propagandist, but the characters are developed in more detail than in *Gathering Storm* and there is a clear focus on the lives of poor mountain folk and their struggles both in the mountains and in adapting to their exploitation by the mill bosses when living in the lowland towns. *Gathering Storm* does not have this aspect to its narrative; as Jenkins Cook asserts, 'the novel suffers from the lack of humanizing details that prevented Grace Lumpkin's mill workers from turning into mere proletarian abstractions.'<sup>101</sup>

From the perspective of feminist readings, Page's two other nineteen-thirties novels have far more to say about the role of working-class women, their lives, burdens, thoughts and emotions. *Gathering Storm* seems to fall short in this area, for although Marge wills the storm and then becomes part of it, her centrality to the

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<sup>99</sup> Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* [1976] (New York: Akashic Books, 2005), 207.

<sup>100</sup> Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, 79.

<sup>101</sup> Jenkins Cook, *Tobacco Road*, 121.

strike is not even on a par with that Bonnie in *To Make My Bread*. On the other hand, it could be said that this represents the 'gathering' of the title, and that the storm itself is yet to truly come.

In the characters of Natahsa in *Moscow Yankee* and Dolly in *Daughter of the Hills*, Page creates feminist protagonists who can be read as models for how women can take control of their own lives and play a vital part in society. Myra Page herself described what Paula Rabinowitz calls 'the revolutionary girls ... [who] were ... stock characters in *Daily Worker* articles about Soviet women workers and American working-class women'<sup>102</sup> as being a "'new type of hero ... with minds largely freed from all those petty household cares that hampered them in the past.'"<sup>103</sup> Ignoring the potential alienation that such a view of household tasks could cause in many people, both male and female, Page does create this character in *Moscow Yankee*. Yet in spite of Marge taking a role in the strike, Page does not do the same thing in *Gathering Storm*, which, when viewed against the other Gastonia novels here as well as the story of Sonya in *Salome*, feels like a missed opportunity.

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<sup>102</sup> Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 50.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*



## Conclusion

The authors and texts studied in this thesis sought to give voice to stories that were generally not heard in the early twentieth century and the interwar years in the USA, namely those that focused on poor working women. In doing so, they challenged established patriarchal presentations of women and explored a different perspective on the lives of the poor in those times.

Middle- and upper-class white men have traditionally controlled the narrative regarding the representation of women, and this was certainly still the case in the first half of the twentieth century. It was a somewhat fixed narrative: sex and gender presented as one, not separate from each other; men as men, women as women, with men being the strong, dominant sex. To varying degrees, the authors in this thesis explore this notion that gender is a social construct, separate from the biological fact of one's sex. This is particularly true in the writings of Fielding Burke: Ishma's battle with her own torn emotions and desires, which is ultimately a battle between her sex as a woman and the societal construct of her gender, epitomises this idea. In contrast, the writing of Anzia Yeziarska probably explores such an idea the least, or at least Yeziarska approaches the issue of women's role in society from a different angle. The character of Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements* almost literally seeks to wear the clothes that would mark her out more clearly as a woman and as an object of beauty, although Sonya is also a strong female character through whom Yeziarska certainly offers a model for how women can stand up for themselves. Unlike the other three authors, Yeziarska presents female characters like Sonya who use physical allure and charm as a means of rising up the social and economic scale. Sonya might be willing to be an object of beauty, but she plays the role of one very much on her own terms.

Yet despite this fact, Yeziarska shares with the other three authors a presentation of women that focuses on the functional nature of their bodies. The reproductive and breast-feeding functions of women are presented by all the novelists throughout their works in a matter-of-fact style. Moreover, maternity is presented as much as a negative state as it is a positive one. This is in part because of the penurious state in which most of the characters find themselves, but it is also

because the novelists are presenting the possibility of roles for women other than or alongside that of motherhood. Further emphasizing this point, there is, aside from Yeziarska's protagonists and Page's Natasha in *Moscow Yankee* in the swimming pool scene, a notable lack of sexuality and sensuality in the presentation of women throughout the works of these novelists. However, the difficulties that poor women face in being mothers while taking on other roles is also highlighted in a number of the novels. The message seems to be that poor women can play an active role in society, and in changing that society, but it comes at an emotional and physical cost. Burke, Lumpkin, and Page suggest shared childcare as a possible solution, and in Burke's novels and Page's *Moscow Yankee* this idea is explored in some detail.

The narrative perspective, the angle from which a drama and its attendant issues is viewed, is also traditionally male. Yet Anzia Yeziarska's protagonists, especially Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements*, achieve their aims by successfully using the male gaze against men – being therefore what Rosemary Garland-Thomson calls 'women [who] relish the arousing aspects of being the object of the male stare'.<sup>1</sup> In Sonya's case, this is not simply a case of ensuring physical attraction; she is a Volitionist, rising above her circumstances and reacting to what Chapman Cohen calls 'the nature and inclination of ... the forces bearing upon human nature'<sup>2</sup> in a markedly different way to those around her upon whom the same forces of nature have been exerted. Sheer willpower and force drive Sonya towards getting what she wants. She resists the view held by great male naturalist authors like Theodore Dreiser, who, Richard Gray explains, sought to 'capture his vision ... of a world governed by the forces of determinism, blind chance and change'.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Sonya is the force of nature.

The American Communist Party did not do as much as it might have done to aid the cause of women who sought equality. Paula Rabinowitz acknowledges that 'the Left had a history of addressing "the woman question"';<sup>4</sup> however, she also asserts that most of the writings in 'the organ of the CPUSA's Women's

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Chapman Cohen, *Determinism or Free-Will* (London and Felling-on-Tyne: The Walter Scott Publishing Company, Ltd., 1912): 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 364.

<sup>4</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 46.

Commission'<sup>5</sup> *Working Women* 'submerged gender within class and so at best were feeble attempts by the CPUSA to theorize the complex relationship of the two.'<sup>6</sup> Burke and Page in particular raise in their novels the issue of contraception, available to wealthier middle-class women but denied almost entirely to the poor working class, and this is a good example of the complexities surrounding the relationship between gender and class, for though the result of a lack of contraception is a gender-specific issue, it affects women of different classes in different ways.

In spite of the historical white male domination of American culture, a fact that extended into the running of the Communist Party USA, the women authors featured in this thesis did have their writing published, and in doing so they found a voice and an outlet for their message. Paula Rabinowitz asserts that most 'CPUSA-affiliated critics ... generally reduced Marxist criticism to discussions of an author's stand on a series of crucial issues, or on his or her class position, to determine literary merit.'<sup>7</sup> The American Communist Party may have subsumed the issue of gender inequality into its wider class focus, yet despite the masculine approach of its literary wing, Rabinowitz explains that E. A. Schachner, who 'distinguished between proletarian and revolutionary literature',<sup>8</sup> criticized Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* for being 'steeped in sentimentality' and lauded 'Grace Lumpkin, Fielding Burke, and Myra Page ... for their novels about the Gastonia textile mill strike.'<sup>9</sup> Rabinowitz further explores Schachner's views: 'He argues that the history of southern white male culture, which constrained elite white women within the double standard, created a sensitivity among these privileged women to the plight of black and white workers. His analysis, in fact, echoes Grace Lumpkin's and Myra Page's own explanations of their conversions to communism.'<sup>10</sup> Schachner's praise for these female novelists is important because it emphasizes that people were listening to these female voices and to their interpretation of the class struggle; furthermore, it indicates that certain critics held the view that these female authors

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

told the story of poor workers in a more effective manner than male authors were able to do.

It is possibly true, as Schachner believes, that Lumpkin, Burke, and Page were able to better understand the class struggle because of the 'double standard' under which they lived as middle-class Southern women. They certainly attempt to demonstrate such an understanding in their work. To varying degrees, Lumpkin and Burke also manage to study the role of poor working-class women within the wider class struggle. They use the fight against poverty as a framework for their writing and women's perspectives as a lens through which to view the wider issue of class and the class struggle. Fielding Burke does this more successfully, while Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* has a more diffused focus, including, as it does with Bonnie and John, two protagonists, and spending much of its time analyzing the characters of Emma and Grandpap. Myra Page achieves this focus on the role of women in *Daughter of the Hills* and to a lesser extent in *Moscow Yankee*, perhaps her best and certainly most feminist work of the 1930s. Fielding Burke, however, is the one author of these three Gastonia writers who bridges the gap to Anzia Yezierska in terms of style and approach. Yezierska is the only proletarian author of those studied here, and she is the author whose writing has the most individualistic outlook. Aside from creating strong, wilful female characters, ones who ought to feature far more prominently in discussions about great literary characters, Burke and Yezierska both suggest answers to how the aims of their characters might be achieved.

In *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling*, Ishma, a poor, working-class mountain woman, gradually comes to understand the workings of communism and manages to adjust her own thought processes and beliefs so that they fit far more closely with Marxist ideals. Yet she does this while remaining very much an individual herself: she is continually torn between her love of the individualistic mountain culture and her newfound belief in some form of socialism. Most of Ishma's knowledge of left-wing politics comes from Derry Unthank, a doctor and therefore a member of the educated middle class. There is an attempt in the novel to explain how communism might work, and Ishma's conversion is portrayed in some detail: Burke explores this conversion and the difficulty that Ishma has in

completely accepting communist ideas. And there is a sense in Burke's novels that working from within the current system is one way of effecting change. Ishma's love for Britt and for the land to an extent ties her to a more individualistic approach to life, and she and Britt retain a farm on which they can live and work. Moreover, Burke indicates that while society needs to change, it is the job of individuals to create that change, and it is at least in some part the responsibility of individuals to improve their own circumstances.

While there is a sense of this individualism in Fielding Burke's novels, it is made very explicit in the works of Anzia Yeziarska, especially in *Salome of the Tenements*. As has already been stated, Sonya is a character with the drive, determination, and desire to drag herself out of poverty using the resources that she has available: her physical appearance, her talents, and her willpower. However, like Ishma, she goes through a learning process. The result of this process is that she does not want to simply join the middle- and upper-classes; instead, by the novel's conclusion she seems to desire a kind of democratic socialism, loose as that term is. She wants to work for herself making clothes, but she wants to make certain that at least some of the clothing she produces is affordable. There is a strong suggestion that she also wants all forms of work to pay a fairer wage, and she seeks a change from an oppressive system of charity welfare. Whereas Ishma appears to harbour the ideal of a communist revolution, Sonya wants very much to work within the system to create change, and like Ishma though to a different degree, the change she seeks is socialist in nature.

In contrast, *To Make My Bread* and *Gathering Storm* do little to explain how any change can or will occur beyond the idea that people need to work together. Unlike the works by Burke and Yeziarska, neither *To Make My Bread* or *Gathering Storm* make any serious attempt to analyse characters from outside the poor, working-class community, and both adhere closely to a Marxist and Communist Party line. This more narrow perspective in these novels leaves them open to the accusation that they are propagandist in nature.

What is most interesting about the four novelists studied here is the simple fact that the only proletarian novelist wrote the least revolutionary novel. Furthermore, *Salome of the Tenements* foregrounds human emotions in a way that

only *Call Home the Heart* and *A Stone Came Rolling* can match. By focusing on a single individual character, Yeziarska and Burke are able to explore in detail the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a working-class woman. Such an approach could increase the chances that the message of these novels will be considered by the reader because she or he will perhaps be more inclined to empathize with the characters. Given that all the novels studied here are about the need for social and economic change, the ability to gain the reader's sympathy and make him or her feel engaged with a character is important. Partly because of this single-character focus, *Salome of the Tenements* and *Call Home the Heart* both feel sophisticated in literary terms, and the elements of propaganda in these novels is horizontal and dispersed, whereas the novels of Lumpkin and Page, notably *To Make My Bread* and *Gathering Storm*, appear to be more overtly and crudely propagandist. Perhaps also the latter two novels could be accused of failing to present Du Bois' 'truth of art': Page in particular seems unwilling to present the white working poor in any negative way.

Yet such distinctions can be misleading. As discussed in Chapter Two and again throughout the thesis, it is questionable whether propaganda and art can ever be separated as concepts. And if it is decided that they can, they are still both about the propagation of ideas. Providing a reader with the feeling that he or she is reading something worthy of being defined as art could make a piece of writing far more effective as propaganda. Perhaps the most effective 'conscious and intelligent manipulation', to quote Edward Bernays,<sup>11</sup> of the way people think is that manipulation which works in such a way that people empathise with it. Such empathy, possibly elicited from the writing of Yeziarska and Burke, might eventually lead to the situation of horizontal propaganda, as suggested by Ellul, whereas the arguably more obvious propaganda written by Lumpkin and Page feels more vertical, making it far easier to identify. This discussion also brings to mind David Welch's point that 'propaganda is ethically neutral – it can be good or bad.'<sup>12</sup> And the discussion is neatly concluded by considering George Orwell's persuasive belief that all art is propaganda. Perhaps recognising this fact and understanding the

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* [1928] (New York, Ig Publishing, 2005), 37.

<sup>12</sup> David Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: from World War I to Wikileaks* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 17.

reasons for it is more important than attempting to make what is ultimately a futile attempt to place any firm demarcations between the two concepts.

When considering what effect the author's own life and experiences have on their writing, Burke and Yeziarska stand out as the two authors studied here whose writing most closely mirrors the experiences of their lives. Like Burke, Myra Page did spend time with poor white Southerners; moreover, she did also do some paid labour. These experiences were, however, with the specific aim of observing and learning about working people, while Fielding Burke actually lived for a significant period of time in the mountains among mountain people. As middle-class women, ultimately neither woman could fully live the experiences of the poor people around them, yet Fielding Burke's characters are written with more nuance than Page's, perhaps indicating that Burke better understood the people about whom she wrote. Anzia Yeziarska truly did write what she knew. While she may have somewhat embellished a number of details regarding her early life, there is no doubt that she came from a relatively poor background: she lived in the tenements of New York City about which she writes, and she knew first-hand the denizens of that world. More importantly, as a poor immigrant she experienced a life of poverty from which there was no obvious escape. The fact that Yeziarska focuses on the need for individuals to raise themselves up and bring about change in society through gradual means is an interesting reflection on her own life experience.

The authors' life experiences do appear to have had an influence on their writing. Yeziarska's political message is the least obvious and probably the most moderate, and she focuses on how much of a part the individual has to play in shaping his or her own destiny. Burke presents a far stronger political message but her work also values the role of the individual, particularly with regard to the decisions made by a particular person. Lumpkin and Page write the most politically explicit novels despite having arguably the least long-term exposure in their lives to not only the type of characters about whom they write, for Page bases Dolly Hawkings on her friend, the real Dolly Hawkings, and Natasha on her friend Valya Cohen, but also to the environment in which their novels are set; those novels lack a developed exploration of their characters and the relationship those characters have with new political ideas.

This thesis has examined a particular group of four women writers, writing at the particular time of the interwar years of the twentieth century and writing about life either in that time or in the years just preceding it. These writers focus on representing the poor, and in particular poor white women, but they also explore issues surrounding race and religion. They write about their characters' struggles both to survive and to improve their situations. The authors' backgrounds certainly appear to have an effect on the way in which they present their topics: perhaps the more they lived the experiences about which they wrote, the less idealistic the writing. Sonya's willingness to use her wiles and Ishma's internal battle with her own racism exemplify this idea. How closely connected the authors were to the Communist Party also seems to have an effect: in simple terms, the more distance from the Party, the more expressive and nuanced the writing. Defining the extent to which these authors' writing could be called propaganda has been shown to be difficult because the nature of what constitutes propaganda and what constitutes art, or literature, cannot itself easily be defined. These works do, however, raise questions about the interaction between propaganda and art, and it is important to consider these issues. The four novelists all offer a portrayal of poor women's role in society that suggests that equality of rights and opportunity between the sexes is a real possibility. Yeziarska and Burke in particular create in Sonya and Ishma powerful female characters who challenge the assumptions of those around them and demonstrate that even in their unequal and prejudiced environments, women are more than capable of being at the very least equal to men.

The four authors studied in this thesis have different backgrounds and life experiences, and a varied intensity of engagement with left-wing politics, but they share a crucial common theme: in writing about their chosen subject matter, they really do give a voice to stories less told.



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