

**IT'S A LIVING: THE POST-WAR  
REDEVELOPMENT OF THE  
AMERICAN WORKING CLASS NOVEL**

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## Abstract

A recurrent premise of post-war criticism is that World War II marked the end of the American working class novel. This thesis challenges this assumption and argues that the working class novel redeveloped throughout the 1940s and 1950s in response to major social, political, economic and cultural changes in the United States.

A prime justification for the obituary on the working class novel was that after 1945 the United States no longer had class divisions. However, as the first two chapters of this study point out, such a view was promulgated by influential literary critics and social scientists who, as former Marxists, were keen to distance themselves from class politics. Insisting that the working class novel was hamstrung by a dogmatic Marxist politics and a fealty to social realism, these critics argued that the genre's relevance depended on the outdated politics and conditions of the 1930s. As such they were able to use literary criticism as a means of justifying their own ambiguous politics and deflecting any close scrutiny of their accommodation with the post-war liberal consensus.

In a close examination of four writers in the subsequent chapters it is shown that, in fact, working class writers were extremely successful in adapting to post-war conditions. Harvey Swados, in his novel *On the Line* (1957) and in his journalism, provides crucial insights into the effects of the transition from a Fordist to a post-industrial society on the identity of the industrial worker. In *The Dollmaker* (1954) Harriette Arnow dramatises an important migration from the rural South to Detroit during World War II which exposes the ways in which American capitalism was able to diffuse a national working class identity. Chester Himes' novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), and his experiences as an African American writer in the 1940s, highlight the intersections between race (and racism) and class in the United States. Hubert Selby, in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), undermines the hegemonic ideology of post-war consumerism by drawing attention to the poverty and violence in an urban working class community. All these writers share a common concern with continuing, and re-developing, the dynamic and heterogeneous tradition of American working class cultural production.

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## Introduction

This is a study of four writers – Harriette Arnow, Harvey Swados, Chester Himes and Hubert Selby – who, through the late 1940s and 1950s, continued the tradition of the American working class novel and, along with a broad range of frequently overlooked writers, contributed to the redevelopment of its form and direction in the second half of the twentieth century. While these writers were relatively successful in the post-war years, they all subsequently suffered from a degree of marginalisation in mainstream critical studies of post-war fiction. The few studies that do acknowledge these writers generally focus on a narrow interpretation of the writer's subject matter or on their contribution to a particular genre. The result has been that Arnow is remembered as a regional feminist writer, and primarily for the film version of her novel *The Dollmaker*, Swados as a labour novelist and journalist, Himes as a writer of crime fiction, and Selby as a counterculture writer who chronicles the extremes of violence and addiction. While these descriptions are, to a certain degree, accurate representations of their work, they are only partial interpretations, and as such obscure the possibilities of a critical examination of the shared class interests between these writers. To take up this investigation raises important questions about the intersection between class identity and the development of the American novel after 1945.

It is the contention of this study that these writers share a common interest in dramatising and depicting working class experience. Their marginalisation is symptomatic of a failure to recognise how American working class fiction made important advances in the post-war years, with many writers responding to the major

changes in American society through the 1940s and 1950s. This failure stems from an anxiety over the application of a class analysis to American literature and society that emerged during the same post-war period, in which the dominant discourse of consensus reinforced the belief in the classless nature of American society. This hegemonic post-war ideology perpetuated an understanding of working class novels as anachronistic cultural products, determined by a commitment to social realism and Marxism, and unsuited to the complexities of post-war America. However, as this study aims to show, these writers were drawing on a powerful and heterogeneous working class cultural tradition, able to utilise a wide range of literary forms and styles, and capable of developing this tradition into the second half of the twentieth century. These writers are representative of a crucial moment in American literary history, in which the working class novel redeveloped at the precise moment that class was being effaced as a legitimate identity marker, and as a tool for the analysis of society and of cultural production.

In major surveys of twentieth century fiction, novels of the 1940s and 1950s tend to be identified under the rubric of what Malcolm Bradbury refers to, in his chapter heading for these years in *The Modern American Novel* (1983), as “Liberal and Existential Imaginations”. According to Bradbury, there was a “new spirit in fiction, seeking to make the novel more than a politics, rather a way into a history no longer open to innocent ideological interpretation”, which resulted in a “modern absurdism, a writing left pained and almost silent in front of an onerous and dark history, dividing self from society” (130). As the first two chapters of this study argue, Bradbury’s assessment of

the novel in the 1940s and 1950s, like many of the major studies, is strongly influenced by the hegemonic cultural and intellectual ideas that emerged in the 1950s. Bradbury's argument that there was a "weakening of ideological commitment" and a "growing preoccupation with moral and metaphysical complexity" (130) stems directly from the ideas developed by the influential group of critics known as the New York intellectuals who are the subject of Chapter Two. What this study argues is that evaluations of post-war fiction such as Bradbury's ignore the fact that a large number of writers, including those in his survey, retained ideological commitments to working class issues, and that the "preoccupation with moral and metaphysical complexity" was not as pervasive as he suggests. Indeed, this preoccupation was driven primarily by the middle class ideology underpinning the prevailing political and cultural critical consensus.

This is not to say that novels that focus on working class issues have been completely ignored. However, due to the dominance of the ideas articulated in influential studies such as Bradbury's, working class fiction has been regarded as a peripheral, and minor, category of writing. The first wave of scholarship that attended to working class fiction in the post-war years included Walter Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900 - 1954* (1956), Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* (1961), Chester Eisinger's *Fiction of the Forties* (1963) and James Gilbert's *Writers and Partisans* (1968). While more mindful than mainstream studies of the ambiguities of twentieth century American literary history, and focusing on a broader range of writers, these works still perpetuate the notion that working class fiction reached a zenith in the 1930s and subsequently declined. A major reason for this is that these studies make an assumption, which can be traced to the mid-century critical consensus, that working class fiction is driven entirely

by the need to proselytise socialist politics, and relies on heavy-handed realism. As such, the post-war writers that are included in these are the more overtly radical writers such as Lloyd Brown and Phillip Bonosky. While it is important that these writers' works have continued to be recognised, they constitute a small proportion of writers of working class fiction in the 1940s and 1950s

Over the past twenty years, however, a number of critics have drawn attention to the presence of a strong tradition of left wing writing throughout the twentieth century. Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals* (1987), and *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (2002), Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire* (1991), Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations* (1993), Harvey Teres' *Renewing the Left* (1996), Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (1997), and Laura Hapke's *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (2001), all offer substantial re-readings of twentieth century literature and culture. More recently, there has been an increase in critical recognition of class as an important category in literary and cultural studies. Both *Modern Fiction Studies* ("Working Class Fiction", Spring 2001) and *PMLA* ("Rereading Class", 2000) have devoted special editions to class, and in 2000 there were two major collections of essays on class and culture, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change* (2000) edited by Sally Munt, and *Class and its Others* (2000) edited by Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff. Critical developments in class theory have been facilitated to a certain extent by the need to re-think Marxism, and Marxist categories of analysis, in the post Cold War climate, particularly reassessing economic determinism and seeking out an accommodation between Marxism and social democracy. At the same time, the United States' position as the sole global superpower has been



undermined by the continued presence of massive economic, social and cultural disparities.

For critical studies on working class fiction, an important consequence of recent theoretical work that re-thinks and re-defines the relationships between class and Marxism has been a recognition of the broader intersections between class identity and gender, race and ethnic identities. The close association of class studies with economic determinism (albeit more an imagined association than an accurate criticism) has always drawn the suspicion that other identities become subsumed under, and are secondary to, the priorities of class. The *Modern Fiction Studies* special edition on working class fiction is representative of these new developments, containing essays covering more nuanced developments in literary theory and class that focus on a wide range of racial, ethnic, and regional literatures. These essays contribute to a broader perspective on what constitutes working class literature, and draw attention to the centrality of class throughout American culture. Bill Mullen, for example, in “Breaking the Signifying Chain: A New Blueprint for African-American Literary Studies”, reiterates Ira Berlin’s argument that “if slavery made race, its larger purpose was to make class, and the fact that the two were made simultaneously by the same process has mystified both”. Mullen points out that “Berlin’s assessment reminds us that the literary genre unique to the African-American tradition – the slave narrative – is perhaps the single largest body on the making of social class in the United States” (147). These essays open up important avenues for a wider range of literary connections beyond the limitations of either race or class alone. Essays on Native American literature by Tim Libretti, and on Film Noir and

African American women's fiction by Paula Rabinowitz, equally point to more dynamic explorations of American literature through a more flexible understanding of class.

This study contributes to these developments in working class literary and cultural studies by providing an analysis of the literary and intellectual situation in the late 1940s and 1950s, a crucial period in the reformation of twentieth century working class fiction. The hegemonic ideology of consensus, propagated in literary and cultural criticism by the New York intellectuals and in political discourse by writers such as Daniel Bell, was instrumental in denying working class cultural and political expressions. Indeed, as this study argues, this denial was a fundamental tenet in the construction of consensus ideology. As such, as the first two chapters argue, an understanding of post-war working class culture requires an appreciation of the terms by which this culture was marginalised. The works of the four writers examined in the subsequent chapters represent a wide range of working class experiences and utilise a variety of literary genres, which reflect the diversity of working class experiences. They have been chosen in order to counter the entrenched belief that working class fiction is primarily didactic and proselytising, and to iterate the point that working class culture and identity is by definition heterogeneous and frequently contradictory.

Chapter One assesses the effects of the liberal consensus on the critical approaches to the development of the post-war novel. The chapter examines Daniel Bell's pronouncement in *The End of Ideology* that the United States no longer had a class system. The chapter points out that such arguments, which sustained the liberal consensus, were influenced by the failure of many critics to understand the complexities and nuances of Marxism and class. The prevailing Cold War intellectual climate, in

which Marxism was automatically conflated with Soviet totalitarianism, helped shape critical approaches to literature that favoured existential and high modernist readings at the expense of recognising the dynamic redevelopments in working class fiction.

The New York intellectuals, the most influential group of post-war literary critics, are the focus of the second chapter. Tracing their evolution from activist Marxists in the 1930s to their accommodation with the conservative liberal consensus of the 1950s, the chapter argues that their pronouncements on literature, particularly the novel, owe more to their own political and ideological investments than to an accurate analysis of post-war fiction, and resulted in the marginalisation of working class fiction.

Harvey Swados' novel *On the Line* (1957) contributed to an important re-thinking about the post-war labour novel. Chapter Three assesses how Swados, in this novel and in his journalism, challenges the assumption that the decline in the industrial workforce signalled the end of the working class. As Swados observes, the transition from a Fordist to a post-industrial economy, with increased mechanisation, the situation of factories away from urban centres, and the increase in unskilled and part time work, actually expanded the working class. *On the Line* was poorly received when it was published, but in retrospect, as this chapter demonstrates, many of the features of the novel that were criticised, particularly its fragmented narrative and sketchy characterisation, accurately capture the complex changes in industrial labour in the post-war years.

In Chapter Four, Harriette Arnow's novel *The Dollmaker* (1954) is read as offering an important contribution to understanding the massive white working class migration North during World War II. The chapter takes issue with critics who regard *The Dollmaker* as a novel primarily about Kentucky and argues that Arnow's novel

dramatises a key moment in the redevelopment of Northern working class identity. The novel offers a powerful illustration of how the influx of Southern workers into the North during World War II, combined with the emergence of consumer credit, helped to dissipate the potential of collective working class consciousness in Northern urban centres. The failure of many critics to recognise the broader significance of *The Dollmaker* is shown to be symptomatic of how the absence of an understanding of class in the United States encourages implicitly middle class humanistic readings of post-war novels such as Arnow's.

Chester Himes' early novels offer important insights into the intersections of race and class in the 1940s and 1950s. Chapter Five considers Himes' 1945 novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, set in the shipyards of California during World War II, as a searing exposé of racism in American industry and the way in which this is fostered by management and business. However, as the chapter shows, the American publishing industry was equally racist, and Himes failed to achieve any critical or commercial recognition, simply being labelled as an angry protest writer. His move to France in the 1950s and his success as a crime writer (encouraged by the French publishing industry), highlights the blindness to the complexities of race and class that was fostered by the American post-war critical consensus.

Hubert Selby's novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957) attracted considerable interest on publication. Its explicit depictions of sex, violence and drug abuse led to numerous court cases for obscenity in the United States and overseas, and consequently the novel is remembered as a cult 'underground classic' epitomising the 'drop-out' drug culture of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as Chapter Six argues, this recognition overlooks the

important contribution *Last Exit to Brooklyn* has made to the development of post-war working class literature and culture. The novel's extreme subject matter and Selby's use of experimental literary forms are indicative of an industrial urban centre struggling to come to terms with the destruction wrought by the transformation from a Fordist to a post-industrial economy. Poverty, a major strike, and high unemployment accentuates crises in working class identity which becomes manifest in sexual and physical violence. For many of the characters in Selby's Brooklyn, confused and aggressive forms of masculinity serve as a means of coping with the contradiction between their continual poverty and the hegemonic promissory consumer culture.

Implicit in this study is the argument that working class literary studies – and indeed all working class studies – should be more aggressive, in a pre-emptive rather than a reactive manner, and advance the case that working class fiction has a pervasive influence on American literary culture. The reluctance, and even refusal, of mainstream studies to engage with issues of class, or to recognise that American exceptionalism is not necessarily that exceptional, belies the existence of a well-defined class structure and this disjuncture suggests that class anxiety remains an important, yet often unacknowledged, factor in American literary criticism. Recognising the presence of working class fiction in the United States after 1945 beyond the liberal stereotype of social realism allows us to appreciate the important contribution of working class writers. There is a need to stop considering working class literature as a subterranean genre constantly knocking up against 'Literature', and start thinking in terms of working class fiction as an integral feature of American literature.

## Chapter One

### Class and the Post-war American Novel

By all popular accounts, the working class novel had reached its apotheosis in the late 1930s, and by 1945 was moribund as a legitimate form of cultural expression – a diagnosis that still permeates literary critical discourse. One of the major factors in perpetuating this perception is the strong association of the term ‘working class novel’ with a didactic programme of literary production directed by an absolute fealty to Marxism and social realism. For example, Jon Christian Suggs in his entry on “The Proletarian Novel” in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, first published in 1978, reflects this common assumption about working class fiction when he writes, “World War II brought an end to ... the anachronistic production of class-based, worker-oriented literature” (245). The demise of the working class novel, for Suggs, was due to its limited perspective and focus on class struggle, and its commitment to radical politics over creative form. According to Suggs, the purpose of the working class novel, and here he refers to the proletarian novel, was two-fold: “to present a clear-cut, constant reflection of the struggle of the working class and at the same time ... to be fully propagandistic” (238). However, Suggs, like many critics, is rearticulating an ideologically informed interpretation that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, which rested on two false assumptions. The first is this conflation of the working class novel with the proletarian novel, which is an ambiguous mixing of terms: the proletarian novel refers specifically to the proletarian literary movement in the 1930s and it is inaccurate to

subsume working class literature under this restrictive definition. As we will see in Chapter Two, this was a move encouraged by critics in the 1940s, particularly the New York intellectuals, who had an ideological and political investment in distancing themselves from the proletarian literary movement, with which they were strongly associated, and who refused to acknowledge the continued existence of class-based literature. The second assumption, that the working class novel was concerned solely with class *struggle* and inherently propagandistic, is equally problematic. Working class literature, and even the proletarian literary movement itself, encompassed a wide range of writers who were at ease with the whole range of literary forms – as likely to use modernist literary forms as social realism or naturalism – and who were frequently resistant to any overt statements or polemics.

This popular conception of working class American literature, epitomised by Suggs, has retained its currency in literary and cultural studies of the post-war period, and has permeated, both implicitly and explicitly, the discourse on American literature in the second half of the twentieth century. The idea that the working class novel is anachronistic – and for this read gritty, polemic and one-dimensional, dramatising the 'authentic' voices of workers struggling with unemployment, low wages and poverty – is a notion perpetuated by the association of the working class novel with the economic conditions of the 1930s. This perception is reinforced by the post-war transformation of the U. S. economy, where the early fears of a return to depression through overproduction during the war proved unfounded. Instead, the United States emerged from World War II as the leading international economic power, and a culture of mass consumption initiated a rapidly expanding economy with high employment and improved wages. In this

transformed economic landscape, the 'gritty' novels of workers struggling to make ends meet suddenly seemed out of place. However, as we will see throughout this study, the relative prosperity of the post-war years did not signal, as many commentators contended, the decline of a class-based society. Rather, the transformation of the economy, and the emergence of a post-Fordist, post-industrial mass society, introduced more complex social and economic problems, which obscured the persistence of real material class divisions.

### **Class, Marxism and American Exceptionalism**

In the teleological narrative of American exceptionalism, 1945 marks an important fault-line in American cultural and political history; in this account the conflicts of earlier decades are merely the forerunners to an inevitable consensual national culture. There is, as with all popular and hegemonic narratives, a certain degree of truth in this. The United States economy was dramatically healthier and, compared to the 1930s, working conditions and standards of living for workers were relatively improved. Moreover, the rise in the number of white-collar workers in lower management and in the sales, marketing and distribution sectors encouraged the belief that the working classes, figured as blue-collar industrial workers, were in terminal decline, replaced by an expanding middle class.

However, in reality, workplace demographics and the job market were much more complicated during the 1940s and 1950s. The idea that the transition to a post-industrial society occurred almost overnight after 1945 owes more to an ideological perception than being attentive to the fact that this process took place over a longer period of time and



that the number of manufacturing workers briefly increased during the 1950s. As Kim Moody points out, “manufacturing jobs rose from 12.5 million in 1950 to 14 million in 1953 [and] industrial employment remained above the 1950 level in 1954 and surpassed it in 1955” (44). Moreover, the belief that the post-war years witnessed a period of calm in industrial relations through the Labor-Management Accord, is also inaccurate: as George Lipsitz notes, “more strikes took place in the twelve months after V-J Day than in any comparable period in American history” (99). Even by the late 1950s, industrial unrest was a major feature of American labour relations, and Nelson Lichtenstein reminds us that the Steelworkers strike against U. S. Steel in 1959, which closed down 90% of the country’s steel production, was “the largest strike in American history ... over issues not unlike those that motivated the Homestead combatants of 1892” (102).

Equally problematic is the idea that the increase in the number of white-collar workers signified an expanding middle class. For all the psychological benefits of wearing a shirt and tie to work, along with the avoidance of the dirt and grime of the shop floor, many of these jobs were no more challenging than industrial labour. In fact, more often than not, these white-collar clerical jobs required a lot less skill, and were often less rewarding, both financially and psychologically, than many skilled manufacturing jobs. The reason that these jobs are regarded as middle class occupations is that the social status ascribed to them is based on the older structures of the Fordist workplace where promotion to middle management was frequently a genuine promotion out of the labouring ranks. However, after World War II, the United States was fast developing a post-Fordist, and post-industrial, manufacturing infrastructure, and the majority of these new white-collar jobs were the result of increased mechanisation and the development of

a more complex and expansive sales and distribution network. As Harvey Swados argues in his journalism and in his novel *On the Line*, while these new jobs attracted the trappings of promotion, with a salary rather than a wage, and a number of extra perks, they carried no decision-making responsibilities, and workers in such jobs were often as alienated from their labour as shop floor workers. It is possible to argue, in fact, that since 1945 the American working class has increased in size, as writers such as Michael Zweig in *The Working Class Majority*, and Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed*, have recently shown.

However, despite these studies, there has been a continued failure to accept the existence of class in the United States; class, according to Michael Zweig, is “one of America’s best-kept secrets” (4). Vanneman and Cannon, in *The American Perception of Class* (1987), suggest that the refusal to engage with class is actually symptomatic of a very strong class system, and that it is the sheer dominance of capitalist ideology that is subsuming class awareness. Pointing out that labour unrest in the United States is more violent and widespread than in Europe, they argue that “what is exceptional about U.S. politics and about U.S. class conflict in general is the extraordinary power of U.S. capital” (167). This view is echoed by Fredric Jameson who adds that “few countries are as saturated with undisguised class content as the United States” (“Marx’s Purloined Letter” 88).

Sustaining this belief in the United States as a classless society has been the post-war re-articulation of American exceptionalism. Exceptionalism, as Eli Zaretsky argues, has “functioned throughout the nation’s history to deny and absorb class conflict” (138), and exceptionalism was the central idea sustaining the so-called Liberal-Corporate

consensus in the 1950s, where the ideological denial of the American class system was most strongly articulated. The most significant contribution to this ideological position was Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology*, first published in 1960, with the title indicating the pluralism where liberals and business could find common ground. However, Bell's study, despite his claims, is not an analysis of the end of ideologies *per se*. Rather, it is clearly a polemic against Marxism. In his Introduction to the 1961 edition, Bell points out: "In the last decade, we have witnessed an exhaustion of the nineteenth-century ideologies, particularly Marxism, as intellectual systems that could claim *truth* for their views of the world" (16). Bell believed that the failure of Marxism rested primarily on its reliance on the category of class. As he writes retrospectively in the "Afterword" to the 1988 edition, the book contained "some sociological studies of American society to show why so many of the analytical categories derived from Marxism, particularly the concept of 'class,' were inadequate to deal with the distinctive complexities of American society" (412). Bell's argument, that a class analysis is not applicable to the American context, rests on an assumption that the United States, as a more advanced and complex society than those in Europe, has exposed the way in which any class analysis is subservient to the dogma of Marxist politics. For Bell:

In European society, the *political* issues, especially after the French Revolution, tended to fall along class lines, but even then, any detailed analysis risked falsification of events simply by focusing the issues in gross class terms. Such a classic of Marxist political analysis as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* comes alive only because Marx depicts so skilfully the play of diverse group interests ... beneath the larger façade of class interests. In the United

States, so heterogeneous from the start, and striated even further by diverse ethnic, national, and religious differences, it is difficult to read the political order ... as a reflection of the economic order. (66 – 67)

Bell's assessment of the relationship between class and Marxism, particularly the way he presents it as a 'foreign' ideology, was conducive to the hegemonic Cold War discourse of consensus and the primacy of liberal democracy, and has subsequently dominated critical thinking on class and culture. However, this analysis is based upon two problematic assumptions: that class is a category yoked in all circumstances to a particular Marxist teleology, and that his own 'sociological' analysis of society, which examines strata and status, is a politically neutral and a more effective analysis of the specific conditions of United States society.

The argument that class as a Marxist category is dogmatically imposed on to analyses of society through a rigid ideological perspective gained considerable legitimacy after 1945, encouraged by the revelations of Stalinist atrocities and the domestic discourses of the Cold War. However, the idea that class is a stable sociological category is actually at odds with Marx's own writings and with most theoretical writings on Marxism. Etienne Balibar, for example, in his book *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, draws attention to the fact that Marx was much more circumspect about the precise nature of class identity. As Balibar points out, for Marx class identity is a "condition" which is "unstable", and rather than implying a rigid division between two opposing classes, class identity is always relational and therefore in constant flux depending upon historical circumstances (125 – 27).

The influential British Marxist historian, E. P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, offers a nuanced understanding of class identity, which stems from his own more independent (and to a certain extent humanist) thinking, and which refutes the dogmatic model usually attributed to Marxist critics. For Thompson, class was not a sociological label (what he refers to as a “thing”) to be neatly imposed on an entity which “is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically – so many men who stand in relation to the means of production” (9). Thompson does not see class as “a ‘structure’, nor even as a ‘category’”, but “as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships” (8). It is important to remember that the term working class is “a descriptive term, which evades as much as it defines” and the connection between experience and class is relational; class becomes a “historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness” (8). It is this relational aspect of class that is key to Thompson’s theory and one of the more difficult concepts to be integrated within, say, positivist philosophical approaches, because “like any other relationship, it [has] a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure” (8). Thompson identifies a crucial distinction between the synchronic and diachronic understanding of class, in that:

If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their

ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is the only definition. (10)

This analysis offers a means of critiquing Daniel Bell's argument that there is an absolute choice to be made between his sociological analysis of society and a class-based analysis. What Bell is offering is, in fact, a false dichotomy between the two, in which a class analysis is judged entirely by its relationship to his sociological model. It can be argued that Bell's error is to take the effectiveness of a sociological analysis of the specific conditions of the 1950s as an absolute refutation, or a denial, of the *process* of class relations – involving access to the means of production and economic and social agency – a process that can only be fully understood over time. In fact, a true understanding of class identity and class relations emerges from a fusion of a synchronic identification of the specific social and economic structures and the historical development of capitalism. This dynamic is present in Marx's own writings, and often goes unnoticed by critics such as Bell.

While Marx does outline the two major classes, the labouring class and the bourgeoisie, he was aware of how the economic and social conditions of the historical moment impacted on their specific configuration. As such, he also identified the various strata that are evident between these two classes, most notably in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he discusses, alongside capital and labour, two transitional classes and several levels of middle class. In *Capital*, he writes about the aristocracy of labour – the better paid section of the working class – as well as other divisions within the working class. In *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* he

identifies the lower middle class and the self-employed, and in *Theories of Surplus Value II*, he acknowledges a new propertyless middle class “who stand between the workman on the one hand and the capitalist on the other” (9).

Fredric Jameson offers a crucial analysis of class that articulates the dynamic and plastic nature of class relations, and which challenges the limited sociological approaches of critics like Bell. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson argues that:

for Marxism classes must always be apprehended relationally, and ...the ultimate (or ideal) form of class relationship and class struggle is always dichotomous. The constitutive form of class relationships is always that between a dominant and a laboring class .... To define class in this way is sharply to differentiate the Marxian model of classes from the conventional sociological analysis of society into strata, subgroups, professional elites and the like, each of which can presumably be studied in isolation from one another in such a way that the analysis of their ‘values’ or their ‘cultural space’ folds back into separate and independent *Welt-anschauungen*, each of which inertly reflects its particular ‘stratum’. For Marxism, however, the very content of a class ideology is relational, in the sense that its ‘values’ are always actively in situation with respect to the opposing class, and defined against the latter: normally, a ruling class ideology will explore various strategies of the *legitimation* of its own power position, while an oppositional culture or ideology will, often in covert and disguised strategies, seek to contest and to undermine the dominant ‘value system’. (69)

The importance of Jameson's analysis here is that it offers a more sophisticated understanding of class in Marxist terms than detractors like Bell allow. While Jameson draws attention to the existence of two classes, they are not discrete and readily identifiable entities. Rather, they co-exist within the totality of capitalist society in a dialogical relationship, constantly in negotiation and conflict over cultural values and meaning. This is an active and ongoing relationship, which, remembering Thompson's argument, is one that is only visible over time, and which in any one historical moment will invariably involve something more complex than two clearly identifiable classes. In contrast, the sociological approach of critics like Bell posits a series of reified groups, or strata, which lacks any historical critical coherence.

Stephen Edgell has recently emphasised how "the precise structure of class relationships, at any one time and place, depends upon the circumstances. For instance, at a time of acute political conflict the class structure is likely to be highly polarized. Thus, class polarisation and class fragmentation are a matter of degree" (9). So, while Bell could claim that the improved economic situation in the 1950s, and the absence of clear class divisions at this time, supports his argument that the United States has become a classless society, this argument can also read the other way around, as his diagnosis is based primarily on the differences between the 1950s and the 1930s. In the 1930s, with the effects of the Depression, class divisions were much more in evident than in the 1950s. In the economic cycles of capitalism, times of economic growth produce more complex social and economic structures, which require a more sophisticated means of analysis, but these periods obscure class divisions only temporarily. In times of



economic hardship, such as the 1930s and the mid-1970s and early 1980s for example, the basic class divisions, which have existed all along, are revealed much more starkly.

Bell's distinction between his sociological model and a class analysis comes down, in effect, to an ideological difference – between a view of the United States as a pluralist, classless society, and a view that acknowledges a definitive class structure – and not, as he portrays it, to the effectiveness of a sociological analysis over a class analysis at any one moment in time. Implicit in Bell's analysis is a teleological judgment that is obscured through the misrepresentation of class analysis, and the over-determination of the effectiveness of his own model to the specific conditions of the 1950s. Despite Bell's critical stance towards mass society, the basic ideology of his position – a commitment to liberal capitalism – was synonymous with the prevailing post-war ideology of consensus, which equally sustained its own legitimacy through the constant denial and obfuscation of its ideological and teleological assumptions. As such, the notion that the United States was a classless society increasingly appeared as a 'natural' consequence of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny; a belief that still retains a strong degree of legitimacy today.

Bell's failure to deal adequately with class, and his tacit acceptance of liberal democracy, are indicative of the way in which the post-war liberal consensus is infused with bourgeois notions of identity. As this study argues, the class assumptions behind the ideology of liberal consensus, which have retained a certain degree of continuity beyond the 1950s, are constantly under the threat of being undermined by any class analysis that draws attention to the actual existence of class divisions or to the middle class assumptions inherent in the so-called classless society. The hesitancy surrounding the

way in which post-war critics, intellectuals, politicians, and commentators refer to the working class, euphemistically using such terms as ‘working families’ or ‘blue-collar workers’, reveals a deep seated anxiety which is the result of the contradiction at the centre of the post-war rejection of a class analysis through the tacit adoption of a bourgeois, middle class identity. The fact that the *New York Times* has run a series on class in the United States, in the middle of 2005, suggests that the anxiety over class identity still permeates critical discourse over half a century after *The End Of Ideology*.

### **Class, Politics and the Novel**

The hegemonic idea that class was an anachronistic mode of analysis encouraged the belief that the working class novel – understood as a mimetic representation of society in terms of the perceived reified Marxist model – was unsuitable for reflecting, or engaging with, the complex ‘reality’ of the post-war period. Instead, critical discourse looked for novels to reflect and understand the supposedly newly reconfigured relationship between the individual and mass society. Accordingly, writers in the post-war period are seen as primarily concerned with what Malcolm Bradbury highlights in *The Modern American Novel* as the difficulties in relating the “individual and community in the new America” (128).

This distinction between the individual and society, in which class is effaced, dominated post-war critical thought on the novel, yet this is an extremely problematic structure, as is evident in the failure of critics to adequately theorise any real alternative to class. Marcus Klein’s introduction to the essay collection *The American Novel Since World War II* (1969), draws attention to this confusion. He notes that a common theme

evident in the essays is that “class consciousness is no longer a sure consciousness of the general social reality”; however, as he points out, “there is no other large awareness to take its place” (14). The absence of any substantial alternative to class is symptomatic of the fact that this generic ‘individual’ and ‘community’ were in fact framed, like Bell’s model, by very specific class assumptions.

The ‘individual’ at the centre of post-war debates on culture and society is indebted to the separation of the mental and material spheres in the historical development of bourgeois society. John Fordham has pointed out, in the context of working class fiction, the importance of Georg Lukács’ work in understanding how bourgeois thought, following Descartes, has “placed too much emphasis on the centrality of the perceiving human subject” (3). The modern subject, formed through bourgeois notions of identity on an understanding of the primacy of thought over the material spheres, is an ideologically constructed individual who has an illusory relationship towards reality:

Thus, bourgeois knowledge is only partial; it cannot comprehend the totality of existence, and this is reflected in an inevitable division of the domain of knowledge into Kantian ‘antinomies’: that is, into ‘unsolved and insoluble’ opposites of ‘subject and object’, freedom and necessity, individual and society, form and content. (4)

As critics such as Raymond Williams and John Berger have shown, this separation between subject and object, and individual and society, resulted in the ideological separation of art and society in the late eighteenth century as a response to the emergence of capitalism. The prevailing discussions of the novel in the post-war years rested on

these same bourgeois assumptions about the relationship between the individual and society, and the function of art as a semi-autonomous sphere through which a specific (high) culture is able to act as a moral or ‘civilising’ conduit.

Following Lukács’ work, we are able to recognise that a *conscious* class perspective not only draws attention to the unstable ideological assumptions in the development of the modern subject, but also presents an alternative critical position in which, through the recognition of the *incompleteness* of modern identity, the relationships between individual and society and between subject and object can be comprehended in their totality as dialectical relationships. As Fordham explains:

The working class or proletariat is not bound by the centrality of subjectivity, but rather has a life-experience which is determined by a perception of the self as object and thus is uniquely able to comprehend the totality of capitalist society in which all the relations have been reduced to that to that of the commodity ... The working class, then, through its life-experience and its consciousness overcomes the antinomies of bourgeois thought because it literally embodies the principle of the dialectic: it comes to a consciousness of itself – the subject – as object ... and thus comprehends the social totality. (4)

As we will see in Chapter Two, the major debates over the novel in the 1940s and 1950s by liberal critics were characterised by considerable anxiety over the ability of literature to reconcile the tensions between the individual and society. Such anxieties were frequently articulated as responses to the emergence of mass society in which the ‘individual’ was becoming fragmented and reified. However, the liberal perspective, despite positioning itself as a critique of mass society, failed to grasp (through political

and social factors that are discussed below) the class construction of this position. The anxiety, therefore, was in fact symptomatic of the intractable problems in attempting to reconcile the individual and society through an idealised conception of art, particularly the novel, without attending to either the illusory nature of bourgeois subjectivity or the reified nature of working class experience.

The hegemonic liberal critical discourse on the post-war novel was dominated by the major figures associated with the New York intellectuals, most notably Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, William Phillips, Philip Rahv and Lionel Trilling. While in the 1930s these critics were very much on the periphery, as independent radicals, by the late 1940s and 1950s they had become established in positions of institutionalised authority. Through small circulation, but influential, magazines such as *Commentary*, *Dissent*, *Encounter*, *New Leader*, and *Partisan Review*, as editors and consultants to leading publishers, and as academics at major universities, they were able to exercise a strong degree of influence over the post-war direction of political and cultural discourses. However, while they ostensibly positioned themselves as critics of society, their relationship to the dominant political liberal consensus of the 1950s was extremely ambivalent. As anti-Stalinist radicals, keen to shake off their previous associations with the Communist Party, while at the same time offering a critique of post-war capitalism, they found themselves increasingly ideologically drawn towards validating the fundamental premises of capitalism. As Hugh Wilford argues, in *The New York Intellectuals*, they became institutionalised, partly through the “inexorability of the institutionalising forces at work” on them, and partly, ironically, through the “misguidedness of their devotion to the ideal of intellectual autonomy” (viii). The

particular nature of their intellectual autonomy – their determination to critique post-war capitalism without employing any Marxist or socialist terminology or ideology – had important implications for the critical understanding of the development of the working class novel.

The New York intellectuals shared many of the political and ideological concerns of Daniel Bell, and, like Bell, had an interest in suppressing the belief in class conflict that had informed their earlier work, and which now potentially threatened their post-war legitimacy. As Wilford points out, “whereas previously they had believed in the dynamic of class struggle, now they regarded America as a static mass society” and believed too that “the classic classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat had disappeared, to be replaced by ‘middlebrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ cultural formations” (62). Importantly for post-war literary criticism this move away from class also involved a devaluing of the economic and a prioritising of the cultural sphere where they saw themselves, as Wilford puts it, “as an isolated and beleaguered minority culture” (62). The New York intellectuals turned to modernism as a means of combating what they saw as the corroding effects of a mass society and a mass culture. Particularly, they were attracted to the modernist belief in the autonomy of art – not for the sake of art itself, but as a strategic withdrawal, positioning them against mass society and ‘middlebrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ culture – through which they could operate as a cultural avant-garde devoted to “the task of guarding the flame of high culture” (Wilford 68). As Wilford suggests, the New York intellectuals’ championing of modernism was restricted to a very specific ‘high modernism’, and they constructed their canon of American literature in large part around the principles behind T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition”. While this strategy enabled them to critique mass society, it also

incorporated the conservative politics of this tradition, and importantly for working class literature, they tended to universalise, and hence valorise a bourgeois subjective identity. Their thematics of the alienated individual served in effect to underpin the hegemonic post-war idea of American classlessness.

Furthermore, their attraction to modernism was influenced by the demands of defining literature as a specialised academic discipline from their new positions in the academy, which encouraged their move to more ‘technical’ analyses to which the difficult texts of certain modernist writers were conducive. The result was the establishment of a homogenised canon of high modernist writing predicated almost entirely on its conduciveness to academic study. This canon was extremely narrow and self-determining; in effect, as Fordham suggests, the result of “a set of formulations which [sought] to extend the canon in terms of the academy’s own definition of its specialism: namely the understanding of literature by the application of a specifically literary way of knowing” (83). Their positive validation of what they saw as the broader tradition of modernism, from Tolstoy through Henry James and T. S. Eliot, to post-war writers such as Saul Bellow, Arthur Koestler and Ignazio Silone, was always difficult to defend as *the* major literary tradition leading into the 1940s and 1950s. The incorporation of this particular lineage of modernism within the academy operated alongside the broader currents of political thought, particularly the liberal anti-Stalinism of the New York intellectuals, to produce a very specific ideological formation: one that implicitly affirmed the belief in the United States as a classless society. It is important to remember, therefore, that post-war debates over the term modernism retain an ideological imprint from the ideological manoeuvres of the 1940s and 1950s. As Fordham cautions,

The ideology of modernism is realised, then, not so much in a set of formal strategies, but in the values and aesthetics of what initially assembled its disparities into a unitary formation: bourgeois criticism, the force of which has been the gradual assimilation of modernism's more radical and disruptive elements into the dominant critical paradigm. (83)

The bourgeois assumptions implicit within academic modernism have important implications when engaging with working class fiction, in that the dominance of this critical paradigm prevents the recognition of the diverse working class uses of literary forms.

However, it was the way in which they fashioned this literary canon, against what they presented as the unimaginative, politically dogmatic, working class novel of the 1930s, which probably had the greatest impact on critical understandings of post-war fiction. To preserve a degree of radicalism for their own project, and to evade any connection with such loaded terms as class, necessitated a critical rejection of the political and aesthetic efficacy of a class based literature. Primarily, this resulted in the denial of the heterogeneous tradition of working class literature, and especially, considering their appropriation of modernism, the denial that working class literature had utilised modernist techniques and beliefs, particularly through the 1930s. As Wilford argues, the editors of *Partisan Review* "tended to construct Modernism as a monolithic cultural tradition, ignoring the fact that the Modernist movement encompassed a wide range of diverse, indeed sometimes contradictory, artistic impulses and techniques" (74). What these critical interventions by the New York intellectuals produced in the post-war



period was the idea that working class fiction was solely concerned with realist form, overt political propaganda, and that it was anachronistic, buried forever in the 1930s.

The long-term effects of this association can still be detected – for example, in Asha Varadharajan’s “Theoretical Afterword” to the 2001 *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue on working class fiction. Varadharajan opens her essay with an admission that “there will be some, no doubt, who will cavil at my quaint defense of an antiquated notion such as class as an indispensable if not necessarily subsuming category of literary analysis” (256). Varadharajan’s ironic swipe at critics who assume that class has no current legitimacy in literary and cultural studies deliberately employs the reified language on class that emerged in the post-war period. As we will see in Chapter Two, when reviewing what they regarded as overtly class oriented novels in the 1940s and 1950s, the New York intellectuals frequently employed terms that emphasised their belief in the anachronistic nature of these novels. Leslie Fiedler, for example, reviewing Nelson Algren’s novel *A Walk on the Wild Side* in the *Reporter* in 1956, argues that Algren remained stuck in the 1930s, and that he had “stood still, more and more lonely, as our literature has moved on and left him almost a museum piece – the Last of the Proletarian Writers” (43).

The appropriation of a very specific interpretation of modernism and the reification of realism has encouraged the view in post-war literary studies that these two forms are mutually exclusive. Whilst there are certain differences between realism and modernism, there are many areas of intersection, both stylistically and ideologically, and the boundaries between them are extremely porous. One of the central arguments of this study is that, contrary to the idea that the working class novel and modernism are

somehow in conflict, the very nature of working class experience lends itself to literary representations that explore the contiguous relationships between literary forms. The effects of the post-war literary establishment, combined with the enduring hegemonic myth of American classlessness, have unfortunately obscured such relationships.

One of the difficulties in countering the assumption that the working class novel is a homogeneous form, has been, ironically, the absence of any sustained and coherent theoretical responses to engage with the heterogeneous character of working class literature, particularly since 1945. As John Fordham has emphasised recently in his study of the Liverpool writer James Hanley:

no overall theory of working-class writing has been developed to cope with the multiplicity of forms which have evolved since the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, most critical work in the field tends to deploy the readily available Marxist formulas: assessing a work according to its evident commitment or on the basis of the conventional social-realist criteria. (2)

Fordham's recognition of the problem however, is representative of a resurgence since the late 1990s in scholarship on working class literature, particularly in the United States, such as the recent special editions on working class fiction in *Modern Fiction Studies* and *PMLA* (see page 4 above). A major characteristic of this recent work, in contrast to many studies in the twentieth century, is an engagement with a more flexible understanding of the relationships between Marxism and class. Stephen Ross, in his Introduction to the *Modern Fiction Studies* special edition, draws attention to the way in which conservative critics in the 1990s had argued that the end of the Cold War marked a final confirmation of the inefficacy of class as a category. In fact, as Ross points out, the opposite has

happened, and the collapse of the Soviet Union has precipitated a re-evaluation of Marxist ideas unencumbered by the spectre of revolutionary totalitarianism, and has in turn opened up possibilities in class studies beyond some of the potential restrictions of Marxist ideology. These conservative critics were merely reiterating a common fallacy, which was “to confuse class studies with Marxism”. Instead, Ross reaffirms the more theoretically expansive approaches to class that have developed through the 1990s, which, while attentive to Marxist ideas, are not conditional upon an absolute commitment to a revolutionary teleological vision. As Ross argues:

one need not believe in the teleological view that sees the proletariat as the motor of history to recognize that economic disparities persist the world over, and that the discursive and performative constructions erected on those material bases play an ongoing and crucial role in the daily lives of even the most hypothetically (and ideally) classless society. (1-2)

Importantly, these new approaches to working class fiction, released from the limited Marxist constraints that Fordham highlights, have been much more attentive to the complex synchronic and diachronic complex formations of working class identity.

Working class fiction, therefore, rather than conforming to any dominant formalistic or political standards, can be seen to reflect the complexity of working class experience. As Janet Zandy has pointed out, “a working-class text centers the lived, material experiences of working class people”, and as such it is important to remember that “contradictory voices in working-class texts are as prevalent as collective ones” (Hapke 5). This recognition of diversity allows for an analysis of working class fiction that moves beyond the limitations of the realist-modernist distinction.

It is possible, therefore, not only to argue that the working class novel has a strong tradition outside of social realism, but also, through the nature of working class experience, that it has a much stronger claim on modernism and avant-garde forms. Central to this idea are the differences between working class and bourgeois perceptions of the relationship between experience and reality. Georg Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, argues that bourgeois thought “sets itself the following problem: it refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (or e.g. has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it instead as its own product” (111). The result of this false consciousness is the belief that the bourgeois subject “has discovered the *principle* which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind” (113). In contrast, the working class, constantly faced with the reality of its alienated existence, is more acutely aware of the disconnections in the capitalist totality. As Karl Marx has written in *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*:

The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognises estrangement as its own power and has in it the *semblance* of a human existence. The latter feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. (36)

The self-awareness of alienation, and the understanding of the illusory nature of subject and object within bourgeois thought, may produce, in working class writing, a more keenly felt appreciation of the value, and plasticity, of literary language. John Fordham

makes the point that this awareness has important implications for working class literary studies, in that

the experience of reification determines its use of a figurative language and the non-realist quality of its forms. Thus [working class] writing itself, while it is often grounded in an ostensible realism, will nonetheless adopt descriptive or allegorical modes in which meaning does not so much depend on a realist plausibility, but on a symbolic or metaphoric representation of a ‘reified’ consciousness. (4)

As the novels in this study demonstrate, the working class novel cannot be identified or examined solely by reference to existing literary formations and genres; instead, like working class experience, these novels actively complicate and challenge such boundaries. While it is possible to detect realist, modernist and naturalist features in these novels, these labels need to be approached with a degree of caution, and with attention to the ideological formation of literary genres, particularly the distinctions between realism and modernism, that emerged in the post-war period. Fredric Jameson’s assertion, that “the truth of ruling-class consciousness (that is, of hegemonic ideology and cultural production) is to be found in working-class consciousness” (*Political Unconscious* 280), reminds us that its complex formalistic, aesthetic, and political structures call for a constant awareness of the dialectical nature of working class fiction, and indeed, of all working class cultural production.

## Chapter Two

### The New York Intellectuals, Liberal Consensus and the Novel

One of the leading New York intellectuals, Irving Howe, writing in the Preface to the 1967 edition of his 1957 book *Politics and the Novel*, looks back on the criticism written by himself and his fellow critics in the 1940s and 1950s, and acknowledges that:

the customary outlook of cultivated people was to insist that the literary work must be seen as self-contained structure, all but free from the pressures of history – indeed, to insist that the literary work was a kind of sanctuary against the corruptions and vulgarities of the world. I believe that I understand why sensitive people, after the debacle of totalitarianism and the Second World War, should have been drawn to this view; and I was by no means unqualifiedly hostile to it, at least insofar as it helped restore some respect for the integrity of the literary work.

(ix)

In this statement Howe captures the contradictory and ambiguous situation of the New York intellectuals in the 1950s. This is, of course, a self-portrait by Howe, and as such conceals as much as it informs. Despite the fact that Howe presents this as a cautious admission of error on their part, he reiterates crucial ideological assumptions from that period. The belief in the literary work as a “self-contained structure” that is autonomous, separate from society, draws attention to the New York intellectuals’ appropriation of a specific interpretation of modernism. The aesthetic and ideological assumptions behind this appropriation of modernism produced an ambiguous relationship between the New York intellectuals and the hegemonic liberal consensus. Like the modernist writers they

championed, such as T. S. Eliot, their radical critiques of society were also deeply conservative. The New York intellectuals' attacks on contemporary society, specifically the effects of mass culture and mass society, were compromised by their solution, namely the importance of the detached, autonomous and rarefied sphere of art. In making this claim for art, and specifically for the novel, the New York intellectuals aligned themselves with the ideological and political beliefs of the Hegelian, bourgeois tradition of 'high' art. At the same time, they supported the post-war hegemonic belief that the United States was a classless society, and that the working class no longer existed in American society. Due to their influential positions in academia and publishing, these views became entrenched in intellectual and cultural discourse, which adversely affected the recognition and understanding of an important decade in working class literature.

Defining a group of writers or critics, such as the New York intellectuals, invariably obscures the differences within the group, and any label needs to be used with caution. Alan Wald, in his major study of the New York intellectuals, details how the term was first used in the 1930s to refer to a group originally called the "Trotskyist intellectuals" and by the 1950s had come to refer to "former revolutionaries who had achieved some reputation in New York intellectual journals" (11). However, as Wald points out, many of the group were not really intellectuals – James T. Farrell, for example was hostile to academia, and James Rorty is more accurately considered a journalist. Others, such as Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfield, were not even from New York. Dispelling the various misinterpretations of, and myths about, the group, Wald argues that the key to the New York intellectuals' overall identity, and central to their importance as a group of critics, is the way their intellectual development cohered around

a series of contradictory but influential ideological moves. For Wald, the key point is “that a group of individuals who mainly began their careers as revolutionary communists in the 1930s could become an institutionalized and even hegemonic component of American culture during the conservative 1950s while maintaining a high degree of collective continuity” (10). This political movement, from anti-Stalinist communism to anti-communist liberalism, was not a straightforward shift from left to right, but a complex series of ideological manoeuvres, “in which certain doctrinal elements appear to remain the same in form while being utterly transformed in content” (11). Ideological cohesion was sustained in this political volte-face through an increasing reliance on cultural criticism, and literary analysis especially, which became the sublimated sphere within which contradictions in their arguments could seemingly be resolved. Moreover, cultural criticism provided them with a critical perspective with which to maintain a radical identity in challenging the effects of mass culture. However, this utilisation of literature for such an ambiguous and complex political programme had a significant impact on the post-war literary landscape, particularly on working class fiction.

The recoil from Stalinism and Soviet Marxism took place in a feverish political climate in which there was nervousness about any relationship with Marxism. As a result, cultural and social analyses based on class considerations were jettisoned in favour of more metaphysical and abstract procedures. Yet, as we will see throughout this chapter, the New York intellectuals’ cultural and political thinking failed to provide any convincing, or ideologically consistent, alternative to class. In fact, it often appears that their new ideas were driven by the desire to seek as much distance as possible from the recognition of class, and as such, class anxiety can be detected in many of their writings.



Containing the threat of this class anxiety is arguably one of the major imperatives behind their comprehensive re-writing of American literary history, in which the working class novel became understood solely as a variant of Marxist realism or naturalism. This reinterpretation, fashioned out of the specific political and ideological demands of the consensus of the post-war period, relies on a reified understanding of class identity, and effaces the vitality and dynamism that has characterised the history of the American working class novel.

Consensus, “the shared agreement between corporate liberals and conservatives (however reluctant) on fundamental premises of pluralism,” was, as Peter Biskind suggests, “outside, perhaps of the H-bomb – the fifties’ most important product” (20). The rise of the United States as a major international economic and political power after World War II, combined with the emerging Cold War, encouraged an acceptance of the importance, and superiority, of liberal democracy, and gave credence to an ideology of American identity based on the teleology of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism. In this, consensus was underpinned by the work of a group of historians, most notably Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin and Richard Hofstadter. These consensus historians, or “Counter-Progressive” historians, as Gene Wise termed them in 1973, challenged previous assumptions about the conflictual nature of United States history. Their understanding of American history was the antithesis of the Progressive historians, such as Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington, who had understood American history in terms of a series of class or sectional conflicts. These conflicts contributed to a number of defining turning points – such as the Civil War – which represented breaks, or

discontinuities, with the past, in a dialectical pattern of revolution and counterrevolution. In contrast, the consensus historians argued that there were common features running through American history, and that historical progression could be viewed as a homogenous political culture working towards a common aim. While they did not deny that historical conflict occurred, they saw these events, including labour struggles, as crises that the United States was able to work through and overcome because of the underlying stability of American society.

This ideology of consensus was therefore predicated on both an affirmation of a national identity, and a reaction against perceived extremism. Leo Ribuffo has argued that consensus, and the pluralist social theory that gave it theoretical and sociological legitimacy, “incorporated into scholarship the premier axiom of the era, that a self-consciously moderate center was vital and valid while the political, theological, and psychological ‘extremes’ were symmetrically deluded and dangerous” (43). The implication here is that the centre could only be sustained by a vigilance against extremes, and this point has important implications for an understanding of class identity. John Higham, in his critique of the consensus historians in 1959, pointed out how their “monistic pattern” of American history effaced class:

Instead of two traditions or sections or classes deployed against one another all along the line of national development, we are told that America in the largest sense has had one unified culture. Classes have turned into myths, sections have lost their solidarity, ideologies have vaporized into climates of opinion. The phrase ‘the American experience’ has become an incantation. (95)

To presuppose that the original condition of American society was consensual, denies the central Marxist idea that class identity is formed historically, that it is created, and redeveloped, through economic and power relations over time. This post-war ‘unified’ culture, rather than being structured around class, was instead seen to be formed around a relationship between the nation and the individual.

The strong interest in the individual in the 1950s was in many ways a concern about the health of the nation, so that a vigilance against ideological extremes extended downwards to a concern over the health of the individual. Andrew Ross has argued that the “rhetoric of containment”, established in United States foreign policy in the 1940s and 1950s, “was to have specific, if pervasive, uses for the domestic settlement that secured the Cold War consensus” (43). The idea of containment, on a political level, transformed into a general discourse on the nation’s health. Irving Howe, for example, could claim that a critique of mass culture “is a necessity of hygiene”, and David Reisman, in his analysis of American society, refused “to give the patient a clean bill of health lest some other doctor find a hidden flaw” (Ross 45). The rhetoric of health and disease permeated the space between the individual and society that had been emptied out by the absence of class analysis. Whereas class had worked through social and economic categories of analysis to attempt to challenge the disconnections between the individual, particularly the working class individual, and society, the rhetoric of containment within consensus internalised any disconnections within the individual as a psychological or nervous problem. Thomas Schaub has shown how liberal consensus “continued to shift the focus away from purely social and economic sources of historical change and emphasised instead psychological and behavioural categories like ‘anxiety’ and

‘conformity’, which cut across class divisions and became dominant analytical terms in the fifties” (17). This is a point reinforced in Dan Wakefield’s memoir, *New York in the Fifties*, where he observes that “The naïve hope of salvation by politics seemed to have burned itself out in the thirties, replaced in the fifties too often by an equally naïve belief in salvation through psychoanalysis” (6). The anxiety produced by this discourse on health and mental well-being served the New York intellectuals’ project well, as it legitimised their roles as cultural guardians, attentive to the cultural, and therefore moral, ‘health’ of the nation.

The fear, or mistrust, of extremes, and the absence of class discourse had ambiguous consequences for the New York intellectuals. Events in the Soviet Union, and the behaviour of the American Communist Party, had left most radicals disillusioned with Marxism, and any comparable radical position became difficult to embrace due to the fierce anti-communist climate of the 1950s, where any broadly leftist position could be interpreted as sympathy towards communism. While the majority of the New York intellectuals accepted liberal democracy and consensus on a broad ideological level, they still maintained a radical perspective. By focusing on the alienating effects of mass culture, they substituted for class analysis one that was concerned with the relationship between the individual and mass society. Alan Wald points out that this shift began in the 1940s, where many of them “advocated the need for an individualistic regeneration different from their former program of social action based on a class analysis of society” (227). However, the difficulty in this move was its accommodation with the capitalist system. Their pragmatic radicalism, or what Wald terms “sceptical realism”, became “either a new variant of middle-class individualism or, more perniciously, a

rationalisation for the continued dominance of bourgeois society to which they had become reconciled” (230).

The solution to this dilemma was to adopt a broadly modernist response in looking towards the aesthetic as a means of critically engaging with a complex society. In fact, as Schaub points out, the New York intellectuals’ emphasis on the importance of art as both a retreat from, and a critique of, society, was circumscribed within the system of democracy:

As in the discourse of Chase, Schlesinger, and Niebuhr, the cold war confrontation between Stalinist Russia and American democracy works to produce or require within Trilling's thought a new definition of reality – complex, difficult, intractable – and its underlying assumptions. Here democracy is the more artful of the two systems because it is a more adequate political representation (or response) to the inherent nature of reality itself. This both reproduces and extends the typical polarities of new liberal discourse between totalitarianism and democracy, utopianism and politics, certitude and ambiguity, resolution and conflict or contradiction. In Trilling especially, these polarities became indistinguishable from aesthetic categories, as both politics and art must subscribe to or recognize the complexities and difficulties of life. (21)

For the New York intellectuals, mass society, no longer divided along class lines, could only be viewed as a fluid, complex whole, and it was art that provided the most effective analysis of this society. Specifically, as Schaub points out, “what they once had to say about culture and politics was now deflected into their criticism of the novel” (29). The attraction of the novel was not just its ability to capture, or represent, society through its

narrative scope, but also that there was a perceived crisis over the state of the novel and the duty of the novelist in the immediate post-war years. The despair over the problems faced by the novelist was most notably expressed in Philip Roth's complaint in 1961 that mass culture has produced a society that is so extreme that "it stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination" (144). What Roth, and many other writers and critics, failed to note was that one of the reasons behind the despair over the efficacy of the novel was the abandonment of class analysis, which had produced a critical vacuum. As we saw in the first chapter, this is a problem that Marcus Klein notes in his introduction to *The American Novel Since World War II* in 1969, in which Roth's essay was reprinted, that while class consciousness is no longer "a sure consciousness of the general social reality", there is an absence of any alternative (14). Klein points out that a common tendency in literary criticism is that "discrete social facts are regarded at best ... as an overbearing confusion, and at worst ... dismissed". The result, according to Klein, is a critical perception that novels such as Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, "clearly have little to do with minorities as an issue", but instead, "their object is to universalise" (15).

This generalised and abstracted view of society and literature suited the purposes of the New York intellectuals well, as it instigated the need for a critical rethinking of novelistic genres, and most notably a reinterpretation of realism, without having to make recourse to class. The New York intellectuals' understanding of realism was most clearly articulated in Lionel Trilling's 1949 essay "Art and Fortune" in *The Liberal Imagination*. As Malcolm Bradbury suggests, Trilling's definition of realism was indebted more to a

complex modernism than to social realism; this 'new' realism, referred to alternatively as 'neorealism' or 'moral realism', Bradbury points out, looked to the novel as "the form that, invested with the spirit of realism, saw in the social world the multiplicity and variety, the contradiction and hypocrisy, the complexity of the experiential and the real that lay beyond system and ideology" ("Neorealist" 1129). The key point in Bradbury's definition is that realism becomes a "spirit", so that the realist novel assumes a metaphysical, rather than a materialist, form and function.

To promote the realist novel as a corollary of post-war liberal democracy, in which a complex and amorphous mass society was contained within an agreed and knowable ideological whole, was an ambiguous project. While it allowed these critics to lay claim to a moral and critical perspective, monitoring the nation's cultural health, it generated certain problems over the function of ideology. Former Marxists, engaging with such ideologically dubious terms as morality and universality, while still insisting on their radical and critical credentials, had some explaining to do. After all, many of the New York intellectuals were now in positions of authority at major universities and part of the critical mainstream. As Alan Wald suggests, "it is clear that the intellectuals' new views had not evolved in isolation from changes in their social status", especially as they "had gravitated toward the seats of power in bourgeois society" (218).

The potential convergence between the New York intellectuals and the ideology of consensus (and therefore implicitly capitalist ideology) was certainly a problem that Trilling recognised. In "Art and Fortune" he maintains that his retreat from a belief in class and his embrace of moral realism still has the potential for a complex range of cultural and political engagements:

Social class and the conflicts it produces may not be any longer a compelling subject to the novelist, but the organization of society into ideological groups presents a subject scarcely less absorbing. Ideological society has, it seems to me, nearly a full range of passion, and nearly as complex a system of manners, as a society based on class. Its promise of comedy and tragedy is enormous; its assurance of relevance is perfect. (275)

Trilling's use of the term ideology here is seemingly paradoxical, considering its common usage in the twentieth century, and certainly in light of his, and other critics', use of the term in the 1930s. However, Trilling proposes a reformulation of ideology to account for the post-war political situation:

Ideology is not ideas; ideology is not acquired by thought but by breathing the haunted air. The life in ideology, from which none of us can wholly escape, is a strange submerged life of habit and semihabit in which to ideas we attach strong passions but no very clear awareness of the concrete reality of their consequences. (275)

In one respect, the understanding of ideology here appears to be quite sophisticated and even a strikingly contemporary view. However, Trilling is cautioning against what he sees as the false promises, and attraction, of *certain* ideological ideas: his reference to the "haunted air" alludes to the post-war *bêtes noir*: fascism and the 'spectre' of Marxism. In doing this, however, liberalism escapes such critical attention as an ideology. In contrast to Marxism and fascism, liberalism, in its post-war manifestation as articulated by critics such as Trilling, is able to elude the charge of ideological dogmatism. The absence of any teleological revolutionary rhetoric in liberalism appears to suggest, in contrast to



Marxism and fascism, a non-totalitarian belief system. The difficulty here is, of course, the complicity between liberalism and capitalism, but this is neatly avoided through the New York intellectuals' focus on the cultural sphere as a critique of "mass society". In a liberal democracy, culture, specifically the novel, has a role in warning against the false promises of certain ideological systems, while effectively mediating between individual desires and wants, and society. For Trilling, the novel, with a "very close and really a very simple relation to actuality, to the things that we cannot possibly not know, [is] the form which provides the perfect criticism of ideas by attaching them to their appropriate actuality" (276). But the problem here is that Trilling's understanding of society is based around an assumption of individual identity which is essentially bourgeois, and fails to engage with the ideological assumptions behind liberal democracy.

Trilling's belief in the function of art within liberal democracy, and the problems of its potential accommodation with capitalism, become even more evident in the critical parallels between the New York intellectuals and the conservative New Critics. A formalist, textual analysis, imbued with an ambiguous metaphysical language, becomes difficult to identify with a radical project. As Michael Denning points out, "as the Cold War constricted the wide-ranging political, social, and cultural debates of the 1930s and 1940s, literary intellectuals turned increasingly inward, adopting the rarefied, technical modes of literary analysis developed by the conservative Southern Agrarians, who had become the New Critics" (434). Although the New York intellectuals retained two key facets from their Marxist past – the belief in teleological historical progression, and the intrinsic interrelations between literary texts and reality – these were carefully

reconfigured to suit their cautious relationship to the post-war consensus, which centred on the use of a more Hegelian, rather than materialist, understanding of history and ideas.

The novel, therefore, became configured as a semi-autonomous sphere in which any resolution that would require some political declaration could be perpetually deferred. For Trilling, the function of what he termed the “moral realist” novel was to critique and assess ideas – particularly moral ideas – on behalf of society (*Liberal Imagination* 205-22). In a manner that echoes the New Critics’ privileging of irony and ambiguity, Trilling’s argument about the role of the novel and the critic mirrors his understanding of society, in that the form of the novel, like liberal society, is able to offer a stable structure within which individual problems can be worked through. However, there is a difficulty in ascertaining how Trilling sees the larger political and ideological implications of this relationship between the novel and society. Although Trilling makes a claim for the central importance of the novel as acting as a “moral” guardian in society, protecting against the potential attraction of ideological extremes, it is difficult to see how his model can avoid becoming a passive reflection, and therefore a validation, of liberal democracy.

One of the major problems is that Trilling falls short of suggesting what political, ideological, or aesthetic conclusions may be reached through this literary criticism. While Trilling does speak of a dialectic teleological form in this schema, which leads to “some conclusion”, the emphasis is very much on “some”. As Schaub points out, “nothing in the remainder of his essay [“Art and Fortune”] offers any other result from this dramatic juxtaposition than uneasy equilibrium” (35). Therefore, this uneasy equilibrium constantly refuses to lead to any resolution, and literary criticism, rather than

offering a sustained critique of society as Trilling suggests, becomes a series of reified engagements within the specialised field of literary studies. Mark Krupnick suggests that Trilling's mind worked "dialectically, not as the Marxists understand the dialectic – to bring about historical change – but to keep the culture on a steady course and maintain an always threatened equilibrium" (36). The result of this, as Schaub points out, is that "Trilling helped initiate the dematerialisation of literary thinking and production by associating 'realism' not with external facts but with the dialectical form of literary ideas produced by conflicting emotions. This was moral realism, in which literature became politics recollected in anguish" (37). As such, Trilling's literary criticism participates in a specialised realm of ideas, without challenging any of the fundamental ideological assumptions of the liberal consensus.

Moral realism, which is often used to describe the New York intellectuals' understanding of literature in the post-war years, is a difficult term to define, and as such is revealing of their ideological beliefs. The essay "Manners, Morals, and the Novel", in which Trilling makes a more explicit defence of moral realism, is extremely ambiguous. Trilling's main concern – a theme running through *The Liberal Imagination* in which this essay is reprinted – is how the novel engages with the difficulties in mediating between "reality and appearance, between what really is and merely seems" (207). On one level, this appears to be a fairly innocuous premise, which could equally be discerned in a wide range of critical approaches to literature; it also suggests a materialist aspect to Trilling's argument, which appears to be confirmed when he attempts to offer a precise definition: "any defense of what I have called moral realism must be made not in the name of some highflown fineness of feeling but in the name of simple social practicality". However,

the exact relationship between literature and society that Trilling is attempting to articulate is, as he admits, opaque: “And there is indeed a simple social fact to which moral realism has a simple practical relevance, but it is a fact very difficult for us nowadays to perceive” (221). Trilling’s difficulty becomes clearer in his next paragraph when he introduces the historical context to his argument:

It is probable that at this time we are about to make great changes in our social system. The world is ripe for such changes and if they are not made in the direction of greater social liberality, the direction forward, they will almost of necessity be made in the direction backward, of a terrible social niggardliness. (221)

Although this formulation is still relatively vague, he is clearly creating a distinction between what he perceives as the limitations of Marxist approaches to literature in the 1930s and the ‘progressive’ potential within “social” liberalism; it is an argument that becomes explicit as the essay draws to a close:

Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination. (221-222)

The problem here, apart from his misreading of 1930s literary criticism, is what precisely is meant by the “free play of the moral imagination”, and what relationship this has to “social practicality”. Malcolm Bradbury’s definition of moral realism, that it presents a “sense of life as lived in complexity, contingency, and actuality”, is equally ambiguous

and reiterates the metaphysical, high modernist, assumptions behind Trilling's argument (1133-1134). Although "moral realism" appears to signify a specific novelistic genre, in fact it refers more accurately to Trilling's (and to various degrees other New York intellectuals') approach to literary criticism. While certain writers whom Trilling particularly favoured, such as Henry James or T. S. Eliot, were more conducive to analysis through a moral realist approach, a large number of writers, particularly working class writers, not only challenged Trilling's assessment of the character of the post-war novel, but also exposed his underlying conservative politics.

The challenges presented by a class analysis of literature resulted in the New York intellectuals' establishment of a literary tradition that would support their project, which involved a retrospective reassessment of American literary history in which class could be effaced. For example, Trilling argues in "Art and Fortune" that "the great characters of American fiction, such, say, as Captain Ahab and Natty Bumppo, tend to be mythic because of the rare fineness and abstractness of the ideas they represent; and their very freedom from class gives them a large and glowing generality" (262). The distinction between an expansive, open literary criticism and the limitations of a class analysis, encapsulates the New York intellectuals' approach to maintaining their legitimacy by the reification of class as a means of criticism. The result of this was two-fold: the de-radicalisation of many canonical novels, and the creation of a specific (and minor) sub-genre of 'working class' fiction in which more 'radical' examples became isolated from the mainstream.

The prime means by which the New York intellectuals effected this reification of working class literature was through a fetishisation of the phrase proletarian literature.

As frequently occurs with the New York intellectuals, they tend to be much more revealing about the ideological underpinnings of their arguments in their later writings when they attempt to move away from some of their earlier beliefs. For example, in a lecture to mark the opening of the Harvey Swados papers at the University of Massachusetts Library in 1979, Irving Howe made a revealing confession about his, and other New York intellectuals', culpability during the post-war years in consigning a major tradition of American literature to the margins. Recognising Swados as a quality writer who was poorly understood at the time, Howe admitted that:

Readers of my own generation had been so badly singed by 'proletarian literature', we succumbed to a kind of extreme, snobbish unease about any fictions dealing with the life of workers. Besides, the conservative chic of the fifties took it for granted that factory workers could not possess a sensibility that would make them fit material for serious fiction. Stalinists having made the workers into cartoon figures, the reaction now was to blot them out entirely, as if thereby to undo a century of literary history in which workers had gradually elbowed their way into the precincts of the novel, through Dickens, Mrs Gaskell, Hardy, Gissing, and Lawrence in England, through Twain, Melville and Dreiser in the United States. ("On Harvey Swados" 642)

Howe's admission would appear to contribute to a re-thinking of the historical interpretation of proletarian literature. However, the lack of attention to the larger implications of their critical arguments in the 1950s is still implicit in Howe's admission, where in his tenor he downplays the seriousness of his proscription of certain writers, and leaves the impression that the underlying problems of their critical projects had long been

sorted out. Howe refers to himself and his fellow critics as merely “readers” rather than critics, passive actors who “succumbed”, presumably to some external pressure, and whose only crime was to profess an “unease” about fictions dealing with workers. The reality of course was that these “readers” were extremely influential taste-makers whose positions inside the academy, and as editors of influential journals and in the publishing world, meant that their judgements carried powerful implications. Their unease, as Howe euphemistically calls it, was in fact more of a systematic assault on the literary and cultural landscape; rather than expressing unease, they were in fact engaged in an extremely pro-active politically informed project with a very clear ideological function.

While Howe does acknowledge the seriousness of these critical manoeuvres in the drawing of literary boundaries – his acceptance that they undid “a century of literary history” – still subtly replicates the ideological underpinnings of his original project. The idea that workers had “elbowed their way into the precincts of the novel” reiterates two important distinctions that Howe’s generation made back in the 1950s. The first is that the ‘precincts’ of the novel, into which the proletarian novel forced its way, are somehow fixed and immutable, rather than emerging within the development of American literature as a whole, as many writers and critics in the 1930s had claimed. Secondly, Howe’s language (“elbowed”) continues to evoke a masculine, urban, and aggressive form, lacking any subtlety or sophistication. This replicates the very ideological language behind the original proscription of such literatures, and importantly invokes images of the male factory worker, trade union politics, and strikes. While these may have been important issues in the 1930s, in the new post-industrial society, they no longer carry such central importance to working class life. What this excludes, obviously, are novels

by women writers, writers with little political affiliation, writers on domestic issues, on the immigrant experience, all of whom were at the forefront of writing about working class experience through the 1940s and 1950s. For Howe, it was the Stalinists who were responsible for turning the proletariat into cartoon figures, and there is a great deal of truth to this. But while certain sections of the Communist Party did adopt a 'party line', insisting on the importance of social realism, large sections on the left, including many in the Communist Party, were much more versatile in their understanding of literature, and on the importance of flexibility in form and content. Invoking the Stalinists in his argument, Howe seriously overplays their influence, and in doing so draws attention to the way in which he, and his fellow critics, were complicit in creating and perpetuating these "cartoon depictions". Moreover, one of the most striking aspects of Howe's confession is the tacit recognition of a long history of novels dealing with class issues, taking in such diverse writers Twain, Melville and Dreiser.

This recognition is in stark contrast to the New York intellectuals' stated positions in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1948 *Partisan Review* published the responses to a survey sent out to a number of prominent writers and critics on "The State of American Writing". In his response to these questions, Leslie Fiedler suggests that the major issue facing writers in the 1940s is in "establishing alternatives to naturalism". He argues that the writer should "re-instate" in his vocabulary "such words as 'freedom', 'responsibility' and 'guilt', words which a little while ago he regarded as obscenities, and which even yet he cannot manage without uneasiness" (870). As a liberal, Fiedler sees the alternative to the determinism of naturalism as personal freedom and moral accountability. Implicit in Fiedler's choice of naturalism is an attack on what he views as the dominant role of the



Communist Party, and its imposition of political imperatives on the writing of proletarian literature. Fiedler's use of the term naturalism throughout his response also conflates naturalism with social realism, and this elides the important distinctions between the two. In doing so, Fiedler implicitly equates the biological determinism present in naturalist writing with what he sees as the social and economic determinism of social realism, in order to reinforce his argument about the reified state of 1930s working class fiction.

There was undeniably a political turn in the 1930s. Michael Denning, in his major study of working culture in the 1930s and 1940s, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture*, points out that “the ‘thirties’ became an icon, the brief moment when ‘politics’ captured the arts, when writers went left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians, and photographers were ‘social minded’” (xvi). However, the iconic status of the 1930s, which still pervades much critical and popular thinking, obscures more than it highlights, as Denning's scare quotes indicate. The role of politics in 1930s culture has become so axiomatic as to obscure the *cultural* importance of the decade. Debate seems to gravitate around the question that informs Denning's reassessment of these decades: were the 1930s “merely a ‘Red decade’ or were they, as Michael Gold claimed, a ‘second American Renaissance’?” (xvi)

Part of the difficulty in arguing that the 1930s did indeed witness a “second American Renaissance” is the prevalence and dominance in the 1950s of the New York intellectuals' critical work, closely aligned with the ideology of consensus and the Cold War, which hindered any development, or cultural exchange, between the literary culture of the 1930s and the 1950s. This problem is compounded by the fact that the New York intellectuals were themselves an integral part of the very 1930s literary and political

environment which they were now critiquing, lending a certain legitimacy to claims which they were apt to frame as admissions of their own prior guilt.

In the *Partisan Review* symposium on “The State of American Writing” Fiedler reinforces his argument about the need for a new type of literature to supersede naturalism by acknowledging his own culpability in the 1930s. Like many other New York intellectuals, his *mea culpa* is expressed through metaphors of maturity and of coming of age. The authority of his argument is further emphasised by the fact that his current position is presented as stemming from an initial reluctance, implying that this argument has been thoroughly worked through:

our revolt began, as it were, against our wills, with technical annoyance, with offended sensibilities – rather than with a program. It was, for instance, the relentless blur of Farrell’s style, the failure of his ponderous honesty; Steinbeck’s shameless extortion of sentiment; the shapelessness of the Proletarian Novel, that moved us, protesting, toward the central recognition that failures of style and feeling were signs of the inadequacy of a tyrannical subject-matter, a systematic reduction of meaning, a ‘scientific’ equation of the individual with the sum of his environmental causes. (870 – 71)

However, his recall is disingenuous as it serves to sustain the impression that the ‘facts’ he presents about the “Proletarian Novel” – that it was the result of the imposition of political dogma on to the novel – are objective truths which even he himself reluctantly had to come to terms with. Yet his complicity in the literary left of the 1930s still requires some coherent explanation, and one that can deflect the accusation that he has

moved to a politically conservative position. He achieves this by presenting his change of view as a narrative journey from innocence to experience:

when we were kids becoming a writer seemed, if not synonymous with, at least an aspect of becoming a Communist; abandoning oneself to the proletariat and finding oneself as an artist seemed a single act. Our awakening was gradual, though a little faster than our political disenchantment, towards a realization of the enormous *contempt* for art just below the culture-vulturish surface of the John Reed Clubs. In such a critic as Edmund Wilson, the old heresy still persists, that art is a solace of exploitation-ridden societies, a second-best expedient that will disappear with Socialism. (871)

Through this narrative, Fiedler is able to present his radicalism as something natural that was thwarted by the reactionary machinations of the Communist Party, thereby implying that his and his contemporaries' radicalism is still alive but now being enacted much more effectively.

As if to make absolutely sure that the Communists and the proletarian literary movement would never again serve to manipulate the radical impulses of writers and intellectuals, Fiedler has a direct warning for anyone who would disagree with his argument: "There is, after all, on his shelf that monument to an opposite approach, *momento mori* [sic] and souvenir of his beginnings in one, *Proletarian Literature in the United States*" (871). This highly successful and acclaimed anthology of radical literature from 1935 serves as a symbol, for Fiedler, of everything that was wrong with proletarian literature; from the mature perspective of the post-war years, what was once considered a monument should rightly now be considered a mausoleum, containing the

ossified remains of a discredited and outdated literary movement. Imagery of death figures strongly in the New York intellectuals' recantation of proletarian literature, but for all the seeming certainty in these obituaries, this imagery reveals a high degree of anxiety. As Lawrence Hanley has noted, "everywhere one looks in the late forties and fifties, proletarian literature serves critics such as Fiedler, Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, and Irving Howe, as the ghostly reminder of what literature once was and must never again become" (716 – 717). The emphatic nature of their dismissal of proletarian literature, and the reason it constantly haunts their writing, is that, as many critics have since shown, the proletarian literary movement was never as dogmatic, or as programmatic, as they argued.

The re-writing of the proletarian literary movement of the 1930s, by critics in the 1940s and 1950s, has been likened by Barbara Foley to a kind of familial squabble in which the young, having rebelled against their elders, mature, and then return to the fold. In the conservative climate of the 1940s and 1950s, "the revolutionary cultural movement of the 1930s ... is safely assimilated into a patriarchal narrative paradigm simultaneously invoking Freud, the Bible, and Father Knows Best" ("Renarrating" 455). In her study of this re-writing, Foley identifies "three principal components by which literary proletarianism was relegated to the dustbin of cultural history" (456). These components, the effacement or marginalisation of suspected left-wing writers from the literary histories of the period, the demonisation of the role of the Communist Party, and the appropriation of certain definitions of modernism, would have a profound impact on post-war working class writers attempting to search out a useable tradition to provide legitimacy for their development of the working class novel.

However, not all writers from the 1930s were consigned to obscurity, and this presents a second difficulty in reconstructing a working class literary tradition in the mid-twentieth century: that of resituating writers who have been appropriated and misread. Those writers who were too important, or too successful, to ignore, such as John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Thomas Bell, Erskine Caldwell and Richard Wright, did have to be included in literary anthologies and historical studies. But, as Alan Wald points out, in being ‘rescued’ from the left they were “de-clawed” or “de-fanged” of their radicalism (“In Retrospect” 287). Foley draws attention to the fact that even in 1973, Richard Pells, in his book *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, was able to read Robert Cantwell’s *The Land of Plenty* and Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* as “explorations of ‘the classic theme of the solitary hero who responds to a crisis on the basis of his own inner strength and conviction’”. For Foley, “Scholars of the radical 1930s increasingly found a metaphysical and existential core in the texts they wished to preserve for posterity” (457). The identification of abstract themes in these novels not only served to detach them from the broader proletarian and working class tradition of which they were a part, but, through this alienation, reinforced the idea that the proletarian literary movement lacked imaginative power or the ability to offer any substantial intellectual or aesthetic insights.

A key accusation made against the proletarian literary movement concerned its relationship to the Communist party. The charge was that the Communist Party dictated a specific line, and that literature had to conform to prescribed ideological themes and structures. In the early years of the Cold War such accusations carried considerable weight, but as Foley and other scholars have shown, the influence of the Communist Party on literature was considerably less than this, and where relationships did exist, the

situation was less restrictive than is commonly believed. In fact, as Foley argues, it was mainstream publishers and critics who complained most about the lack of radical political content in many of the novels, and any dictates from the Communist Party were actually resisted by the majority of working class writers (459). However, the linkage between proletarian literature, the Communist Party, and (through the implications of the loaded term proletarian) Marxism, has always been a difficult one to undo, and formed the central focus of the re-writing of the 1930s.

The 'end' of the proletarian literary movement was first announced by Philip Rahv in "Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy" in the *Southern Review* in 1939, an essay which captures the ambiguous intellectual and critical positions of the New York intellectuals as they made the transition away from class. For Rahv, the movement's downfall could be directly attributed to its close relationships with the Communist Party: "It is impossible, in my opinion, to understand the development of this literature, its rise and fall, without understanding its relation to the Communist Party" (*Essays* 293). According to Rahv, the Communist Party imposed its political will on the proletarian literary movement. This political imposition was "empty of aesthetic principle", offered no "direction", merged "art and politics" and drew "no distinctions between the politics of writing in a *generic and normative sense* and the politics of an individual writer in a particular historical period", and failed to distinguish between the writer's alliance with the working class and any particular political party (295). The result, according to Rahv, was that writers were persuaded by the Communist Party critics "to turn out sentimental idealizations of the worker-types they were describing in their stories and plays. These works, most of which were quite crude as literary art, presented a silly and distorted

picture of America” (300). What was even worse for Rahv was the lack of principle of the Communist Party itself, which was confirmed by the Communist Party’s support of the Popular Front and Roosevelt following the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935. The result was that, aside from the shameful turnaround in politics, the Communist Party abandoned any interest in proletarian literature:

Having abandoned its revolutionary position and allied itself with liberal capitalism, its cultural requirements are altogether different from what they were in the past ... That the political party which fathered proletarian literature should now be devouring it is no cause for astonishment. A certain type of internal cannibalism – witness the Moscow trials – is intrinsic to its history and necessary for the fulfilment of its peculiar tasks. (300-1)

However, Rahv’s criticism of the Communist Party is, as Barbara Foley has shown, deeply flawed. While the Communist Party’s abandonment of proletarianism during the Popular Front was legitimate grounds for admonishment, its impact on the proletarian literary movement was limited and, further, working class writers during the 1930s produced a wide range of literary works that did not conform to the type of criticism put forward by Rahv and other critics in the 1940s and 1950s. Rahv’s attack on the Communist Party’s influence was ambivalent, and Foley draws attention to the fact that Rahv’s criticisms amounted to a “series of internally contradictory charges against the CP which amounted to the proposition that it had been both too radical and not radical enough” (“Renarrating” 458). Rahv’s sophistry can be read as symptomatic of his personal battles over his own position as a radical, moving away from the influence of the Communist Party, but wary of his own potential rightward drift.

Rahv's insecurity can be detected in his arguments about class. For Rahv, the Communist Party was able to manipulate the proletarian movement because the basic principle of working class literature and culture is "quite simple and so broad in its appeal as to attract hundreds of writers in all countries", and "can be reduced to the following formula: *the writer should ally himself with the working class and recognize the class struggle as the central fact of modern life*" [original italics] (295). What Rahv is implicitly suggesting here is that the Communist Party, through its various critics and theoreticians, insisted on class *struggle* at the expense of class *expression* and, through this political imperative, denied the true aesthetic and social value of proletarian literature. Importantly, at this stage of his career, Rahv still maintains that it is possible for a working class literature to transcend any imposed political programme, an argument that the New York intellectuals would eventually jettison:

It is essential to understand the difference between a literature of a class and the literature of a party. Whereas the literature of a class represents an enormous diversity of levels, groupings, and interests, the literature of a party is in its very nature limited by utilitarian objectives. A true class literature constantly strives and partially succeeds in overcoming and transcending its given social limitations. (297)

As Foley has shown, Rahv's argument that the Communist Party had "substituted the literature of a party for the literature of a class", became an "oft-to-be-repeated phrase" in the obituaries on the proletarian literary movement ("Renarrating" 458). However, this dismissal of working class literature obscures a subtle shift in Rahv's understanding of class that is occurring in this article.



On one level, it appears that Rahv, in keeping with his own, overtly Marxist position earlier in the 1930s, is setting his own radicalism and commitment to working class politics above that of the reactionary backsliding of the Communist Party. In an editorial in an early edition of *Partisan Review* in 1934 entitled “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature” Rahv and William Phillips (Phillips writing as Wallace Phelps) write:

The question of creative method is primarily a question of the imaginative assimilation of political content. We believe that the sensibility is the medium of assimilation: political content should not be isolated from the rest of experience but must be merged into the creation of complete personalities and the perception of human relations in their physical and sensual immediacy. The class struggle must serve as a premise, not as a discovery. (8)

Rahv’s and Phillips’ argument here is based upon a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics between class, politics and literature, and this optimistic outlook on the future of proletarian literature also welcomes the role of the Communist Party: “The last year has seen a quickening in the growth of revolutionary literature in America. The maturing of labor struggles and the steady increase of Communist influence have given the impetus and created a receptive atmosphere to this literature ... Cantwell, Rollins, Conroy and Armstrong have steered fiction into proletarian patterns of struggle” (3).

Phillips and Rahv reiterated their confidence in the importance of class in the creation and maintenance of an important literary tradition in another article on proletarian literature in *Partisan Review* in 1935, in which they argue that “Art, like every other form of communicative activity, is a social instrument and hence an instrument in

class struggle” (“Criticism” 18). Importantly, in light of Rahv’s later position, they also insist that the role of class is not one that imposes a predetermined structure on or around literature, but rather offers direction in the creation of literature:

The class struggle as an economic and political reality is the *directive image* of revolutionary literature, but around that center the artist builds a network of human experience in all its multiplicity. The class struggle is not a mould into which the artist stuffs experience; it is the reality giving coherence and structure to wide ranges of life. [original italics] (22)

But in this article they also set up an important distinction between two opposing approaches to working class literature, between the imposition of class politics on literary production and an understanding of the dynamics of class expression:

There are still too many writers and readers who see class conflict in literature only at the point of physical collision between bourgeoisie and proletariat. This idea leads to the *summarizing* of the rich background of workers’ lives up to the terminal of open strife, as in strikes, demonstrations, and other overt political acts. But it is the combing of the vast and complex background behind these overt acts that would give us epics of working class experience .... Though it is true that middle class attitudes still prevail among workers, their economic orbit separates their day-to-day existence from that of the bourgeoisie. A working class panorama of types and individuals of the scope of *Ulysses*, for example, would uncover new layers of literary material for revolutionary writers and start a fresh tradition in American literature. In novels like *The Land of Plenty* and *The Disinherited* we

get a sense of thematic exploration that suggests the immense possibilities ahead of us. (22-23)

Of course, at this point, Phelps and Rahv see themselves as proponents of the latter view and it would be the Communist Party, a few years later, who would be charged with the first. However, only four years later in his ‘Autopsy’ article, Rahv would accuse the entire proletarian literary movement of this deadening insistence on class struggle.

Oddly, Robert Cantwell and Jack Conroy, the respective authors of *The Land of Plenty* and *The Disinherited*, whose work Rahv praised so highly in 1935, by 1939 are included in a list of writers in none of whose works he finds “an imagination or sensibility which is not of a piece with some variety – either plebeian or aristocratic but mostly the former – of the bourgeois creative mode” (299).

This dismissal forms part of an ambiguous argument by Rahv in which he negotiates his abandonment of the Communist Party whilst attempting to retain his radicalism. In doing so he sets out a new interpretation of his understanding of class in the US:

But there are classes and classes, as there are parties and parties. Not all classes are capable of producing an art and literature of their own. The conception of a proletarian literature relies for its defence on abstract and formal analogies between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Literature is an outgrowth of a whole culture, one of its inseparable parts and manifestations. A class which has no culture of its own can have no literature either. Now in all class societies it is the ruling class alone which possesses both the material means and the self-consciousness – independent, firmly rooted, and elaborated – that are the

prerequisites of cultural creation. As an oppressed class, the proletariat, insofar as it is a cultural consumer, lives on the leavings of the bourgeoisie. It has neither the means nor the consciousness necessary for cultural self-differentiation. Its conditions of existence allow it to produce certain limited and minor cultural forms, such as urban folklore, language variations, etc.; but it is powerless to intervene in science, philosophy, art, and literature. (297-8)

Potentially, Rahv's argument here could be read as a radical statement. His recognition that the working class possess limited opportunities for cultural expression on their own terms is a precursor to debates within post-structuralism over the potential for working class agency, as well as Fredric Jameson's argument in *The Political Unconscious* "that the *truth* of ruling-class consciousness (that is, of hegemonic ideology and cultural production) is to be found in working-class consciousness" (280). Certainly, Rahv retains a Marxist discourse in the passage above, referring to a dominant and a subjugated class, but he undercuts this with quite a remarkable comment:

If historically American literature can be said to possess an ideology that generalizes it socially, it is none other than the ideology of capitalist democracy; and it is hardly necessary to develop a proletarian literature so that it may practice ideologically what American literature has been practicing virtually since its inception. (303)

Rahv's suggestion, that American literature has always been ultimately trapped within the ideology of capitalism, is deeply flawed, not only if we consider such novels as *Moby Dick*, but overtly anti-capitalist novels such as *Sister Carrie* or *The Jungle*. But, in the same article, Rahv also argues that art is able to prove its "superior humanity" to politics

through its ability to resist the abstract summarising that characterises political discourse, and that it is the novel which is the “pre-eminent example” of an art form that is able to critique and expose the superficiality of politics. For Rahv, “whereas politics summarizes social experience”, the novel, placing politics in “the real context of a living experience”, is able to subject it “to an empiric analysis” (303). However, in his essays in the late 1930s Rahv has a clear idea of the type of novel that is able to perform this function, which is now substantially at odds with his previous preferences. In these essays Rahv begins to articulate an understanding of the critical function of the novel through an adoption of modernist arguments, and this is particularly evident in his writings on, and admiration for, Henry James.

Rahv’s adoption of modernism allowed him to negotiate, and obscure, his retreat from the organised left. By utilising the writings of Trotsky, Rahv positioned himself as an independent Marxist, but Rahv’s class affiliation was never clear, and so his desire to carve out a radical identity, underpinned to a certain degree by Marxist theory, was always going to be an ideologically precarious move. It would be modernism, and specifically high modernism, that Rahv would co-opt as a medium through which the potential contradictions in his position – between his self-portrayal as a radical Marxist and his potential endorsement of liberal democracy – would be effaced. As Alan Wald points out, “Rahv’s elitist fixation on modernist culture was of a piece with his conception of an ‘independent and critical Marxism’” (*New York Intellectuals* 371). His critique of society therefore, was not directed by class or economic issues, but instead was conducted through a strategic withdrawal from any association with capitalism within the spheres of literature and culture.

Rahv was not alone in this strategic manoeuvre and the appropriation of high modernism; as Barbara Foley points out, it was a part of a more general trend that included other New York intellectuals and the Southern New Critics:

The restriction of modernism to high modernism was the brainchild of the New York Intellectuals - led by the group around the now-sanitized *Partisan Review* - and the New Critics, who had put under wraps the more explicitly reactionary politics that had guided them some twenty years before. ("Renarrating" 461)

In both cases high modernism served as a means of obscuring the political nature of their respective projects. For the New Critics, high modernist ideas of detachment, the importance of close textual reading, and the autonomy of the work of art, were conducive to their implicit political and ideological beliefs in the superiority of organic community, and their desire for a critical withdrawal from capitalist society; as such, they would never be overly troubled by charges of conservatism. However, for the New York intellectuals, who had established their careers as radical Marxists, the embrace of high modernism would potentially have major political implications, particularly as through the 1940s and 1950s they had established themselves as an elite group within the establishment, holding prestigious positions in universities and in publishing.

The major threat to their reconceptualised radicalism, based upon a dismissal of class politics and Marxism, was the uncomfortable fact that modernism had been a central feature of the proletarian literary movement throughout the 1930s and was a constant presence in working class literature throughout the 1940s and 1950s and beyond. Their rejection of proletarian literature, through a caricature of the entire movement as producing purely realist or naturalist fiction, with the implication that this literature was

unimaginative and dominated by political directives, was arguably an attempt to deny the existence of a radical modernism. In fact, as Alan Wald argues, it is possible to identify a number of 1930s novels, generally subsumed under the proletarian/naturalist banner, that in fact contain many modernist elements and techniques – for example, Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, and James T Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (*New York Intellectuals* 96).

The New York intellectuals' shifting of positions have had a considerable impact on how the twentieth century American novel has been understood, and organised, around the genres of modernism, realism and naturalism, leaving as their legacy a critical discourse that is embedded in the specific context of mid-twentieth century politics. As Barbara Foley points out, modernism especially was defined almost entirely through its applicability to the New York intellectuals' needs, in light of which "high modernist canons of aesthetic value, 'vital center' liberalism, and plain old anti-Communism are inextricably interwoven" ("Renarrating" 462).

As we saw above, the New York intellectuals were cautious about using the term modernism directly, preferring instead, following Trilling, to talk of 'moral realism'. By using the term moral realism the New York intellectuals were able to deflect attention away from the bourgeois formalist 'art for arts sake' ideology that would threaten their claims to radicalism, while still differentiating their literary preferences (and ideology) from the social realism of the proletarian literary movement. The New York intellectuals presented their moral realism as more particularly suited to the classless American society than social realism or naturalism, in its ability to engage with 'individual' experience and questions of morality. But the demarcations between modernism, social

realism and naturalism, and the way in which these terms have been ascribed to certain writers through the critical discourses of these mid-century manoeuvres, are deeply problematic. In effect, the New York intellectuals' influence over generic definitions initiated what Raymond Williams identified as a selective tradition.

The most ambiguous genre label that was promulgated by the New York intellectuals' re-writing of American literary history, and one which still circulates today, was naturalism. Writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Frank Norris, and Nelson Algren, for example, have all been described as naturalist writers, yet this is not entirely helpful if we consider the actual historical emergence of naturalism. Émile Zola, in his preface to the second edition of his novel *Thérèse Raquin* in 1868, sets out quite clearly his definition of naturalism:

In *Thérèse Raquin* I set out to study temperament, not character. That sums up the whole book. I chose protagonists who were supremely dominated by their nerves and their blood, deprived of free will and drawn into every action of their lives by the predetermined lot of their flesh. Thérèse and Laurent are human animals, nothing more. In these animals, I have tried to follow step by step the silent operation of desires, the urgings of instinct and the cerebral disorders consequent on a nervous crisis .... I freely admit that the soul is entirely absent, which is as I wanted it. (4)

Zola's definition of naturalism (which crucially predates Freud), is concerned with the purely physical, biological and scientific behaviour of characters, based on the nineteenth century understanding of temperament which was derived from the medieval concept of humours. While the lower class characters in novels by Dreiser, Sinclair, Norris and



Algren are reduced to the basic functions of living, they do possess inner consciousness and a sense of the larger cultural and societal structures. The novels themselves moreover are not scientific observations, but retain a strong sense of engagement with society, and show an implicit faith that things can be better. The labelling of these American novels as naturalist stems from the need of many critics and intellectuals to position their own preferences by overly stressing the determinism that is seen as central to their understanding of working class literature. Social realism, figured against moral realism, emphasises the perceived social determinism of the former over the more expansive and sophisticated nature of the latter. Yet, while in many of the novels labelled naturalist or social realist there is a certain degree of determinism, this is primarily social and economic, not biological, and the determinism is not an absolute, but rather, drawing close to modernism, holds out the possibility of transformation. As Lawrence Hanley has pointed out, “rather than contaminating literature and literariness ... proletarian literature foregrounds the secret ambition of all modernist writing: to redeem the social power of representation and narrative” (730).

Not only are the terms social realism and naturalism unhelpful in assessing a great range of working class novels, but as many critics have argued, working class and proletarian writers were often at least ambivalent about, if not in fact wholly supportive of, modernism and modernist techniques. James T. Farrell, for example, so often regarded as the prototypical proletarian writer, and whose own novels were self-consciously oriented towards social realism, not only expressed admiration for Joyce, but was an early critic of some of the more limiting tendencies of some proletarian novels, as in his 1936 *A Note on Literary Criticism* (Wald 262). Barbara Foley also highlights the

ambiguous relations between modernism and the proletarian literary movement by pointing out that the *New Masses* editor Granville Hicks, “often treated as a Stalinist hatchet man, praised Proust for his ‘extraordinary full and detailed portrait’ of bourgeois decadence”, and that Joseph Freeman, a Communist Party theorist “opined that *Ulysses* offered a ‘marvellous mirror of the decay of capitalist civilisation’” (“Renarrating” 461). The supposedly clear line between modernism and realism drawn by the post-war intellectuals becomes even more ironic when we consider Philip Rahv’s and William Phillips’ own attitudes to modernism in the 1930s. As Barbara Foley points out, Phillips criticised Joyce “for ‘detaching his characters from significant social patterns’ and adjudged Joyce’s method useless in ‘presenting social conflict ... against a background of class struggle.’” At the same time, “Rahv determined that Eliot had ‘fallen into the swamp of mysticism and scholasticism’ and must be ‘discounted as a positive force in literature’” (“Re-Narrating” 461). Attempts to fix the relationships between writers and form utilising the realist, modernist and naturalist model, employed with such confidence by the New York intellectuals and permeating post-war critical discourse, invariably fail to produce any consistent result.

The critical history of Henry Roth’s 1934 novel *Call It Sleep* illustrates how the influence of the New York intellectuals’ interpretations of the American novel served to perpetuate an elitist hierarchy, symptomatic of an anxiety over the subject of class politics which this attention to questions of literary form attempted to subdue. On publication, *Call It Sleep*, along with Michael Gold’s *Jews without Money*, generated considerable debate among critics as to their proletarian credentials (Denning 236). The difficulty presented by Roth’s novel was its strong focus on interior subjectivity and its

linguistic experiments through a blending of Yiddish and English; yet the subject matter was clearly concerned with lower working class experience. A review in the *New Masses*, concerned about the novel's lack of overt realism, suggested that "it is a pity that so many young writers from the proletariat can make no better use of their working-class experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels" (Denning 513). Roth's novel constantly resists any clear generic definition within the modernist, realist and naturalist model. Michael Denning's definition of the novel as a "Ghetto Pastoral" is probably more accurate, as is Malcolm Bradbury's description, where he writes that *Call It Sleep* "is a work of complex urban expressionism that bridged the space between social and political naturalism and fictional rediscovery", since both definitions are attentive to the complex interrelationships in the novel between literary form and subject (Denning 236 & Bradbury 103).

Alfred Kazin, who ignored *Call It Sleep* in the 1930s, writes an extremely positive and effusive "Introduction" to the 1991 edition of the novel. Kazin's reassessment of the novel, and his recognition of its quality and importance, is obviously a positive contribution towards the rehabilitation of many 1930s novels. Even more encouraging is Kazin's acknowledgement of his and his fellow critics' culpability in the 1940s and 1950s in ignoring the breadth of 1930s working class novels:

Surely the depressed 1930s produced nothing but "proletarian literature" and other instances of left-wing propaganda? A fashionable critic in the opulent years after 1945 scorned the 1930s as an "imbecile decade." He explained – with the usual assurance of people who have more than enough to eat – that the issues in literature are "not political but moral". Anyone who thinks political and moral are

unrelated is certainly living in a world very different from the 1930s – or the 1990s. (ix)

However, Kazin's praise utilises the very model that denigrated *Call It Sleep* in the first place; for Kazin, it "is a work of high art, written out of the full resources of modernism" (ix). To regard *Call It Sleep* simply as a modernist novel is extremely dubious. While the recognition of its technical qualities is a positive move, this is undercut by Kazin's exaggeration of its modernist credentials. In effect, Kazin is 'elevating' the novel out of its historical, cultural and political context into the nebulous sphere of "high art". This de-politicisation of *Call It Sleep* is made much more explicit later in the Introduction when Kazin attempts to locate the novel in a broader literary context and writes that "with this novel we are in the city-world not of *Sister Carrie* but of James Joyce's *Ulysses*" (xiii). The choice of Dreiser as a negative comparison to Roth is not a random one, but revisits the critical debates of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly if we remember Lionel Trilling's negative assessments of Dreiser throughout the essays in *The Liberal Imagination*. By claiming *Call It Sleep* as a quintessential modernist novel, Kazin is replicating the artificial mid-century hierarchy structured upon a perceived difference in literary form in which Roth's (modernist) novel is superior to Dreiser's (naturalist) *Sister Carrie*.

This separation of the two novels on purely formal grounds effaces the strong political, social, and economic affinities between them, specifically their concern with, and dramatisation of, American working class experience. While they may differ in their formal structures, this difference is not as absolute as Kazin suggests. *Call It Sleep*, with its focus on inner experience and language utilises modernist techniques more

substantially than *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser's novel, focusing on the alienation of labour and the effects of consumer culture, quite obviously makes much more use of the tradition of social realism. Both Roth and Dreiser are making *selective* choices from a *broad range* of literary techniques to fit the particular subject of their fiction, not adopting wholesale the ideological assumptions of form, which have in fact been imposed retrospectively by critics such as Kazin. Working class life is not a subterranean existence, requiring some specialist literary form, but participates, albeit in varying degrees, in the entirety of capitalist experience and, as such demands a literature that is able to source from the whole range of literary techniques. Moreover, from an international perspective, Kazin's comparison of *Call It Sleep* and *Ulysses* for their high modernist credentials, and their privileging over *Sister Carrie*, also potentially negates the working class politics in Joyce's novel, and denies the transatlantic class commonalities between Dreiser, Roth and Joyce.

Any attempt to frame literary periods around definitions of form or genre invariably obscures the nuances and complexities of fiction, but the adoption of specific critical terms, demarcated on a hierarchy, reveals much about the politics and ideologies of the historical period in which they were promulgated. The legacy of the New York intellectuals' critical interventions in the 1940s and 1950s was a reified distinction between the 1930s, in which the major literature was social realism concerned with a direct engagement with social and political issues, and the 1950s, dominated by a literature of modernist or aesthetic retreat. This distinction, however, does not bear up under close examination, but does reveal the class anxieties of the New York

intellectuals. The espousal of a modernist-inflected moral realism suited their abandonment of class politics, and obscured their tentative embrace of the liberal consensus.

The New York intellectuals' reification of working class literature, as symptomatic of a well-meaning, but ultimately flawed, impulse of the 1930s, and their appropriation of modernism, still permeates critical discourse today, in large part due to their institutionalised status in universities and in publishing. As Foley points out:

While these new cultural arbiters of the 1950s proposed their definition of modernism as a purely apolitical phenomenon, based upon the unbiased judgement that a movement ought to be identified with its 'best' practitioners, it was clearly a territorial – indeed, an imperialist – move designed to elevate conservative writers to canonical status and relegate radical and progressive writers to the margins. The battles of the books being fought every day in English departments around the country in the 1990s are in no small degree further sorties and defensive maneuvers in a war of longer duration than many of us are aware. (“Renarrating” 461)

However, the writers in the following chapters are representative of a wide range of working class writers in the 1940s and 1950s who resist such categorisations. Contrary to the prevailing belief, they were as likely to utilise modernist and experimental literary forms as social realism or naturalism, which, again challenging prescribed thinking, is precisely what working class writers have always done.

It is worth bearing in mind Bertolt Brecht's understanding of literary form, in his contributions to the realist-modernist debate with Lukács, where he argues that “literary

works cannot be taken over like factories”. Brecht makes the point that “realism is not a mere question of form”, and that “were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists”. Central to Brecht’s argument is that reality itself is never fixed, and, because “reality changes” then, in order to represent it, “modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new” (“Against Georg Lukács” 85). If there is a constant in working class fiction, it is not, as many critics would contend, a fealty to social realism, but a constant engagement with the altered realities of capitalist society through its historical developments. Working class fiction, like working class life, can never be fully encapsulated, but is constantly negotiating these changes, and as such utilises all the literary forms available. The obituaries on working class fiction in the 1940s and 1950s reveal more about the politics and ideologies of the dominant critical discourses of the post-war period than about the historical development of American working class literature.

## Chapter Three

### **It's a Living! Harvey Swados and the Culture of American Labour in the 1950s**

As World War Two drew to a close, a series of labour strikes erupted across the United States in response to uncertainty over the post-war economic situation. Major disputes involving automotive and longshore workers quickly developed into general strikes across the country. It was, as George Lipsitz has noted, a precarious time, and “more strikes took place in the twelve months after V-J Day than in any comparable period in American history” (99). This strike wave was not however a precursor to a period of sustained militancy, as many feared, and others hoped. Rather, it quickly became apparent that the government, and even labour leaders, were not going to tolerate radical action by workers. In October 1945 President Truman blamed the strikes on a “few selfish men” who were obstructing re-conversion and told workers to “cut out all this foolishness” (Lipsitz 114).

By the mid 1950s, a new arrangement between labour, business and government, the so-called Liberal-Corporate consensus, combined with a booming consumer driven economy, contributed to a reconfiguration of the public image of the industrial worker. A character in a short story by Nancy Pope Mayorga, in the *Saturday Evening Post* on January 11, 1958, typified this new individual. Entitled “Holiday for Howie”, it opens by announcing Howie’s predicament on having his working hours reduced: “At first glance it seemed terrific, a four-day work week! But then he found there was a catch in it”. The catch of course was what to do with all the free time. Howie takes to drinking, sleeping



during the day, and leading a generally disreputable life, while his wife continues to work full time on the domestic chores. But ultimately, in responsible fashion, Howie decides that he cannot sustain this life of inactivity and takes a second job. The story closes as he informs his wife of his decision:

‘Oh, Howie.’ There was love and admiration in her muffled voice. And vague regret. ‘Cheer up, Doll. Think what we can do with the extra money – lots of things. Think what we can get – a new car, with all the gadgets! Color TV! Air conditioning! We’ll really be living! Smile, Doll!’ (34)

These two images of the industrial worker – one a radical labour agitator and the other a responsible and materially satisfied consumer – frame a hegemonic narrative in the 1940s and 1950s of the decline of the central importance of the industrial worker in American politics and culture. This transformation was enmeshed within a larger cultural movement, whereby the economic success and stability of the post-war years encouraged the belief that the United States was now essentially a middle class society. At the heart of this shift was the notion that the working class consisted, almost in its entirety, of blue-collar workers who were union members, poor, and predominantly male. Although, as many critics have pointed out, the number of industrial workers increased through the 1950s, and trade union membership reached an all time high, the popular perception of the decline of the importance of the industrial worker after 1945 is deeply entrenched. The 1950s did mark a turning point in manufacturing; it is the period in which the U. S. economy began to transform itself from Fordism to a post-industrial economy. These changes in the industrial economy and the dominant narratives of a middle class consumer society presented enormous problems for writers of the labour novel. On the

one hand, they faced an ideological onslaught against the validity of any type of labour fiction, which was considered, like Truman's striking workers, to be overly radical, foolish, and anachronistic; on the other hand, they felt a need to engage with the very real changes that were occurring in manufacturing. It is the negotiation of these two forces – the imposition of various ideological narratives and the developments in manufacturing and the economy – that is central to the fiction and journalism of Harvey Swados during the 1950s. Although having strong socialist sympathies, Swados is consciously aware of the dangers of attending too closely to an ideological line, and he is equally critical of the left and of conservatives. Unlike the work of writers who maintained a strong commitment to the 'traditional' labour novel, such as Philip Bonosky, or writers who engaged fully with the problems of consumer culture at the expense of a consideration of labour, Swados' attempts to understand the relationship between production and consumerism in the 1950s offer crucial literary and social insights into this important period in the history of the labour fiction and of the industrial worker.

While the ideology of the Cold War and the anti-communism of the 1950s certainly impacted on the publication of overtly radical novels, Swados was more concerned with the effects of social and economic changes on the reconfiguration of the industrial worker's identity. It is possible to identify two simultaneous processes under way that had important implications for the understanding of the industrial worker – the reification of the industrial worker, who now became a synecdochical figure of *the* working class, and the ideological obfuscation of the relationship between production and consumption. In the first instance, this perception supported the idea that the U. S. was now a classless society. As the industrial worker became regarded as a declining force, it

was easy to see the working class as something that existed in the past. In a *Voice of America Forum* lecture, published in 1966, Harold L. Wilensky, a professor of sociology at the University of California, uses this exact formulation to argue that “a clearly defined working class no longer exists”. While he accepts that there was some form of working identity in the past, this was predicated on the idea of transition: “class consciousness among manual workers is a transitional phenomenon – characterizing workers not yet accustomed to the modern metropolis and the modern work place” (132). Here, Wilensky intimates the idea that the working class are manual workers, and also that developments in manufacturing and the economy after 1945 have rendered the working class obsolete – a point he makes more explicitly when he suggests that his lecture will provide “a more realistic picture of the position, prospects, and mentality of that minority of the urban labor force that we customarily label ‘manual worker’ or ‘working class’ and its relation to other classes” (135).

While the industrial worker became a “minority” there was a need to account for the growing middle class, and this was achieved through the configuration of the individual as a consumer. However, this produced a divided identity, especially when, as Swados pointed out time and again, the industrial worker and the consumer were in fact the same person. Moreover, the belief that the working class, as an industrial worker, was a declining minority, alongside the creation of the ‘modern’ middle class consumer, denied the existence or possibility of the working class consisting of the increasing number of low level white-collar workers, and part-time service employees, especially women, who emerged in great numbers in the 1950s. The relationship between production and consumption in the post-war years presented a number of problems for

writers, particularly as there were significant changes in the economy. On the production front, many manufacturing jobs had been replaced by new technology, resulting in fewer 'traditional' manual roles. As such, there were fewer 'jobs for life' with an increase in short-term contracts, and, importantly for the narrative structure of the labour novel, with its emphasis on community, factories were increasingly situated away from urban or residential areas, taking advantage of the new transport networks. In terms of consumption, wages were considerably higher than in the 1930s, work and wage contracts were more secure, and there was a mass availability of consumer goods and easy credit.

However, as Richard Godden points out in *Fictions of Capital*, despite the strong consensus in the 1950s that the worker had been replaced by the consumer, "consumption cannot be divorced from production". Godden's study emphasises the point that, while changes in production and consumption do occur, they should not be read as an effacement of class identities, but instead that these developments throw up new configurations of identities that need to be addressed:

Of course, the system of production changes, deterring sociability among producers; indeed, part of my intention is to pursue shifts within the history of production as they affect the forms of 'self' privileged by the shifting logic of exchange and available to writers caught up in that logic. Nonetheless, even as the blue collars whitened, with the onset of full Fordism during the 1950s, class subjects did not simply vanish into the consumer as a universal subject; distinctions continued to form around issues of race, gender, non-union and part-

time labour, thereby providing an evaluative ‘outside’ from which the dominant culture might be resisted. (6)

Harvey Swados’ 1957 novel *On the Line*, which depicts the lives of workers in a Ford automotive factory, based on the Mahwah, New Jersey plant where Swados worked on the assembly line briefly in the 1950s, was his attempt to develop the labour novel in new directions in response to developments in production and consumption. While he never suggested that the labour novel in its traditional form was no longer of any value – indeed he returned to this form later in his career – *On the Line* reflects a change in how the experience of labour could be fictionalised. The ‘traditional’ labour novel reflected the conditions of the pre-war period. The factory had a central position in the narrative, which was generally situated in a community and focused on a small number of central characters, and which frequently lent itself to a form of *Bildungsroman*, in which the central character achieves some form of political awakening, and awareness of class-consciousness. Novels that fit into this category include Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* (1939), Jack Conroy’s *A World to Win* (1935) and *The Disinherited* (1939), Thomas Bell’s *Out of this Furnace* (1941) and Phillip Bonosky’s *Burning Valley* (1953). In contrast to these labour *Bildungsroman*, Swados’ novel is fragmented, episodic, containing multiple characters with very little depth, and is frequently regarded as a series of short stories as opposed to a novel. However, to read *On the Line* as a series of short stories is to miss what Swados is attempting to reflect: the impact of the redevelopment of factories on peripheral sites outside urban centres, the transient nature of industrial labour, the impact of the ideology of the middle class consumer, and the absence of any strong ideology or belief system

among both workers and the companies. The novel was poorly received on publication, both by those on the left who complained about its lack of depth and ideological commitment, and by more liberal and conservative critics who felt that Swados was still too concerned with the old subject of labour, and that the novel failed to address the deeper psychological problems of the alienated consumer. However, recently, as we will see in this chapter, the novel is increasingly regarded as much more prescient than it was in the 1950s. Despite the relative obscurity of *On the Line* it is, along with Swados' journalism, an important text in understanding the cultural representations of labour and class in the 1950s. Swados' attempts to resituate the labour novel within the emerging conditions of post-industrialism are indicative of the limitations placed upon, and the difficulties faced by, the writer of labour fiction in a crucial period in the history of American class relations

### **Harvey Swados and the Cultural Discourse of Labour**

Although historically Harvey Swados has become a marginal figure, in the 1950s he was a relatively influential writer, particularly through his journalism. Swados' essays, which covered subjects as broad as the conditions of labour, the Taft-Hartley Act, literature, film, politics and sociology, were widely read, and his 1959 essay in *Esquire* magazine "Why Resign from the Human Race?", ostensibly a critique of the apathy he detected in young people, generated such a response that it was credited with inspiring the formation of the Peace Corps. While his primary concern was conditions and developments in industrial labour and radical politics, he nonetheless constantly engaged with the broader cultural and political implications of the relationships between industrial

work and society. His most emblematic statement can be found in his 1957 essay, published in *The Nation*, “The Myth of the Happy Worker”. In this essay, Swados accepts that the industrial worker may very well have all the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle, but, he points out:

there is one thing that the worker doesn't do like the middle class: he works like a worker. The steel-mill puddler does not yet sort memos, the coal miner does not yet sit in conferences, the cotton-mill hand does not yet sip martinis from his lunch box. The worker's attitude toward his work is generally compounded of hatred, shame, and resignation. (*Radical's America* 112)

Swados' concern over the tension between actual work experience and the cultural lifestyle implicit in the middle-class ideology of consumerism was that the worker became divided, and, because work itself was ignored, middle-class aspirations further accentuated and compounded the degradation of the workplace. Swados was well aware of the Marxist undertones to many of his arguments, but he avoided any overtly Marxist ideological line. Partly for generational reasons, and partly out of temperament, Swados managed to negotiate the ideological and cultural gaps that began to appear between the 1930s and 1950s much more fluently than a number of other writers and critics.

Born in Buffalo, New York in 1920, Swados joined the Young Communist League at high school, and while at the University of Michigan joined Max Shachtman's Trotskyite Workers Party. Although exposed to the intricacies of the Communist and radical environment of the Popular Front years, he did not reach maturity as a writer until after World War Two and as such, by avoiding the massive ideological baggage carried by many 1930s writers, he became, as Alan Wald explains, very much an “independent

radical” in the 1950s (*New York Intellectuals* 763). Nelson Lichtenstein makes the point that Swados, along with Michael Harrington, were part of a bridging generation of radical intellectuals who “were products of the anti-Communist left, but both were somewhat younger, and if truth be told, far more familiar with the actual flavour of post-war urban poverty or the nit and grit of manual work” (160). Old enough to have experienced the Depression and the radicalism of the 1930s, Swados could appreciate the interconnections between the 1930s and 1950s far more easily than many of his slightly older contemporaries. Swados’ political position owed as much to a pragmatic understanding of working life and an emotional attachment to social justice as to any precise political ideological programme. As Lichtenstein points out:

Swados was not interested in measuring either workers or their unions by the yardstick of Bell or Mills. It was not their relationship to socialism that provoked Harvey Swados, or the collaboration of the trade unions in the Cold War, or even the persistence of economic inequality. Rather, Swados took the dignity and meaning of work as his touchstone, and with it the continuing reality of class in American life. (160)

Accordingly, Swados avoided some of the more spectacular intellectual gymnastics carried out by others on the left and retained a pragmatic but committed radical perspective. Indeed, Swados often appeared to be as frustrated with his fellow liberal writers and intellectuals as with corporate bosses and politicians, and he was aware of how easily dogmatic anti-communism blinded many to their own move to conservative positions. In an essay entitled “Be Happy, Go Liberal” he suggests, in the lightly sarcastic tone that is present in much of his journalism, that:



In recent years there has been an increasing tendency on the part of certain of my contemporaries ... to regard international communism as one vast scheme designed solely to make them look ridiculous. Indeed, they sometimes give one the impression that their resentment against Stalinism was originally aroused not by oppression, violence, and subversion, but by the shame at the temporary success of the Communists in hoodwinking them during the Thirties. (*Radical's America* 265)

While Swados was influenced strongly by the realist tradition in fiction, he was uncomfortable with its relevance in the post-war years; as Irving Howe has suggested, he “shuttled back and forth between traditional realism and a variety of experiments, mostly in shorter fictions” in his attempts to reconcile the tradition of literary realism with the increasingly fragmented nature of the post-war industrial experience (“On Harvey Swados” 640). Yet Swados was wary of jettisoning realism altogether, just as he was wary of the knee-jerk reaction against communism.

During 1946 and 1947, Swados completed his first novel, *The Unknown Constellations*, but this was rejected by a series of publishers and did not appear until 1995. Although the rejections may have been due partly to what Laura Hapke calls the novel’s “wavering literary quality” (254), they may also reflect a general unease on the part of the publishers, and possibly even Swados himself. The novel is a standard “working-class coming of age novel” (Hapke 254) in which the main character, a returning veteran called Jack Rodenko who is college educated, fails to find any personal connections with his work colleagues or those who share his rooming house in New

Orleans. Hapke suggests that the novel contains the early engagement by Swados, in light of his understanding of the conditions and problems of labour in the post-war period, with the problem of writing on labour in a period of prosperity, or what she terms the “dilemma posed by the non-ideological workingman” (254). In his depiction of the “workplace lassitude” of the workers, Swados fell short of the ideological certainty which would have attracted more radical publishers, yet the novel was too ideological in its subject matter and style for mainstream publishers (255). The tensions evident in the novel, between the attractions of the ideological certainty of social realism and the realisation of the changed social and economic conditions (the dilemma of the “non-ideological workingman”) would become much more finely drawn in *On the Line*. While the ambiguity of this relationship captured the situation of the post-war worker, it failed to conform with the emerging post-war paradigm, which helped condemn it to obscurity.

Despite this setback, Swados continued to write, and between 1947 and 1955 published a number of short stories while subsisting on part-time work, primarily in public relations and writing for television. In 1955 his novel *Out Went the Candle* was published. Opening as the United States enters World War Two, it focuses on a Jewish businessman, Herman Felton, who thrives in the underground world of finance during the war. Throughout the novel, Swados shifts between the generations, building the narrative through conflict and individual perception, rather than any central mediating theme. Irving Howe points out that in this novel Swados uses the war as an enabling device to draw together two important themes: “the shift of American Jewish life from Ghetto to suburb and the floundering of young people in a chaos of vocation, style, value” (“On Harvey Swados” 639). At this point in his career, Swados was clearly aware of the

substantial changes occurring in the United States after the war, but just as clearly uncomfortable in totally jettisoning the past, and the novel shows him searching for continuities across the boundaries of the war.

In February 1956, short of cash, Swados began work at Ford's new plant in Mahwah as a metal finisher, a job he had previously done in Buffalo in the early 1940s. Part of the motivation in taking this job was to research the changing conditions of labour, and here he developed the idea for *On the Line*, which he wrote around his shifts. The novel was unusual for the time; after all, as Hapke points out, "Swados muckraked the world of autoworkers in a time when their pay and conditions were among the best in organised labour" (256). Not only was the novel dealing with an unpopular subject – especially when the unions were under increasing criticism for either corruption or for being too close to management – but the style of the novel was not what critics expected of a labour novel. In the main, therefore, critics tended to ignore it, although those on the left who were grateful for any type of novel that dealt seriously with work and class rated it highly. However, as Alan Wald points out, the scarcity of any labour fiction in the 1950s, combined with the hostile political climate, led many of these critics on the left, in their haste, to misread it:

At the time of its publication the few reviewers of *On the Line* who accorded it serious attention tended to celebrate the 'authenticity' of Swados's depictions of assembly-line workers. Ironically, Swados's character portraits are partial and somewhat contrived, as if he sought to offset certain negative images of workers by going too far in the direction of 'prettifying' them. Thus he fails to show the true range of responses to capitalist oppression. For example, none of the workers

speaks the language one hears in factories and working-class bars, and there is no hint of wife-beating, very little racism, and no instances of escaping the pressures of the work routine through alcohol and drugs. (336)

For Wald, the strength of the novel lies not in its ‘authenticity’ or mimetic quality, but in the way in which “Swados used literary craft to express his political vision”, specifically the way in which the novel successfully dramatises the four characteristics of alienated labour in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (336). Importantly, in *On the Line*, Swados demonstrates an understanding of how fundamental conditions of labour and alienation are configured differently through history as the means of production and consumption, and the relations between them, change. Swados is responding to new demands on the writing of the labour novel by situating the novel in the specific conditions of the 1950s, particularly taking into account the relationships between production and consumption configured around class identity, and the new physical location of factories on the outskirts of cities. The novel’s importance lies in this awareness of the new conditions of industrial labour and the effects these had on the writing of the labour novel. *On the Line* utilises literary modes that draw from both realism and modernism and rests uneasily between them, producing an ambiguous narrative, a fragile balance that reflects the ambiguous identity of the American worker in the 1950s.

### ***On the Line***

The measured, fragmented style of *On the Line* encapsulates the tensions between the physical reality and unreality of factory work and their effects on the identity the

industrial worker. While each chapter stands on its own as an individual story, there are many interwoven threads throughout that develop as the novel progresses, and which show a deliberately crafted commentary on the experience of factory life. The two opening chapters feature two protagonists who are young and idealistic and who share a naïve approach to factory work. As such, they offer an introduction to factory life, each in his own way regarding the factory as a temporary, and even benign, experience in his life, thanks to a faith in the American Dream of social mobility through hard work.

Importantly, both characters are cultural outsiders. The first chapter, “The Day the Singer Fell”, tells the story of Leroy, a young African-American, and the second “Fawn, with a Bit of Green” features Kevin, a young Irish schoolteacher who has just arrived in the United States. Leroy has moved to New York with the dual aim of sending money home to his family and saving up to become an opera singer. Kevin is on an adventure from Ireland, in awe of the big city and of life in America, both of which he sees in the fantastic structure of the factory, idealised as if through the eyes of a booster for heavy industry, marvelling at the professionalism and sheer technical complexity of the place. He even sees the obligatory medical, which other workers regard as invasive, as a great free service. For both characters, the work is peripheral to their life experience, merely a temporary stage in their lives. These two chapters set up a tension, through the two naïve outsiders, whose work experience quickly exposes the fragility of their belief in the temporary nature of the work, and the ineffectual nature of the dreams that sustain this belief. Larger cultural and political forces, either the realities of racial prejudice or the ephemeral nature of consumer products, ultimately reinforce the unsustainable contradictions of industrial labour. Having set up this initial thesis, Swados moves

through the novel to older characters and examines how these initial tensions are then re-articulated and embedded over time.

There is another important aspect to the characterisation in the opening two chapters, which becomes more apparent as the novel progresses. Both Leroy and Kevin conform to cultural stereotypes – Leroy is big and strong, and sings and smiles when at work and Kevin has flaming red hair and is also depicted as strong and naïve. These caricatures have the effect of accentuating the question of reality in the factory, opening up an important tension – made much more explicit in the next chapter – between a surface reality and a deeper engagement with the workers' alienation.

The third story, "Joe the Vanishing American", is arguably the key chapter, as unlike any of the others, it is not really about Joe at all; instead it focuses on Walter, an eighteen year old who is working at the factory only in order to send himself to college after his father has become unemployed. In fact, Walter could probably be regarded as one of the most authentically realised characters, and is present in nearly every chapter, although he receives no chapter heading of his own. In contrast, the character of 'Joe' is indistinct; nobody knows his real name or anything about him, and he refuses to tell the other workers about himself. Walter's conversations with the other workers reflects many of Swados' own concerns about the experiences of factory work, and thereby functions as a crucial mediating device in the novel. Joe in particular takes an interest in Walter, which runs counter to his usual relations with his work colleagues, and in this it is possible to detect Swados' own presence in the novel. Like Swados, Walter is college educated and working at the factory temporarily, and Joe is presented as an older, wiser character who has an intelligent understanding of factory work; in fact many of the

workers suspect that Joe is actually a professor who is ‘slumming it’ – rather like Swados working at the plant in 1956. The relationship between these two characters is suggestive of a tension between the older and younger Swados, which also mirrors the generational tensions between the 1930s and 1950s. And it suggests competing impulses: the younger, idealistic writer, eager, and driven like Walter in an “eternal attempt to find a community of interest” (17), in tension with the older, more cynical writer, who like Joe, points out to the younger self that it is impossible to find this community:

Instead of learning names, we refer to the fellow with the bad teeth, or the guy with the blue coveralls. When I work next to a man for months and learn that his wife is being operated on for cancer of the breast and still don’t know his name, it tells me something, not just about him and me, but about the half connections that are all the factory allows you in the way of friendships. (34)

This tension indicates a struggle between the purpose and development of the novel, and it is possible to identify Walter as the “realist” side of Swados and Joe as the “modernist” side. The half-connections referred to by Joe are important in Swados’ depiction of character; it is possible to know the deepest most personal details of a person yet not something as basic as the name. The reader then is exposed to the craft of the novel in that characters are put together in collage fashion, whereby surface details and perceptions are as important, and often much more important, than names. Characters are perceived as much through cultural expectations and snippets of information, which feed off cultural stereotypes, perpetuated by the processes of mass culture, as through any real knowledge of the workers as individuals.

The belief of these younger workers in the temporary nature of their work is brought into sharp relief in the following two chapters. These focus on older characters: “Pop”, who has worked on the line for as long as anyone can remember, yet has never achieved any management position, and Orrin, who failed in business, and has been forced to return to industrial work. Key to both these characters is the way in which they rationalise their positions in the factory. Pop, “worn by fulfilling the task of his generation”, is offered an inspection job, yet he believes that this is a slight on his physical ability to do his line job, and that if he was offered this position because of this, then “his worker’s pride would have demanded that he turn it down” (45). The solution by management is to appeal to this pride and suggest he take it because of his “expert eyesight” (45). Pop’s physical pride in his work is representative of a generational division in the factory that has important implications for the effacement of a strong class identity through the developments in production and consumption. Pop is of the generation that, experienced in the conditions of the 1930s and 1940s, finds the new automated production practices a shock. Accordingly, they cling to a nostalgic view of the past, particularly located in a physical pride in labour and commitment to the job. In contrast, the younger workers view the factory as something transient, without any history, and merely a stage in their youth. In effect, the older workers embody Fordist production, while the younger ones, on the way to another ‘stage’ and a better job, are more eager to participate as consumers in a post-industrial society.

Pop’s motivation in buying a car for his son is deeply ambiguous, so much so that he is unable to articulate his reasons, and in an exchange with his fellow worker Orrin he is unwittingly forced to reveal a fundamental contradiction, both in his attitude to his own



son and to the younger workers. He explains to Orrin how young people treat manual labour with disdain, and that “Nobody wants to give a day’s work for a day’s pay any more” (49). However, when Orrin points out that he doesn’t see Pop bringing his son into the factory, Pop’s response is immediate: “‘God forbid!’ Pop cried fervently. ‘If he couldn’t do any better than this’ – but then he stopped, struck suddenly dumb by the contradiction into which he had been lured” (49). This contradiction is one that Richard Sennett and Jonathon Cobb would identify in their 1972 study, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. In their study of industrial workers, they found that many of these workers were ambivalent when it came to bettering themselves, and transfer the same ambivalence towards their sons. For one of their interviewees they point out that:

Capturing respect in the larger America, then, means to Frank getting an educated position; but capturing that respect means that he no longer respects himself. This contradiction ran through every discussion we held, as an image either of what people felt compelled to do with their own lives or what they sought for their sons. If the boys could get educated, anybody in America would respect them; and yet ... the fathers felt education would lead the young into work not as ‘real’ as their own. (22-23)

After his son is killed in a drunken car accident, Pop’s feelings towards Walter become even more confused. He becomes angry and irritated with Walter, who, with “his sweat and his lousy miserable work and his burning ambition to save money and go to college” is both the son he wished he had, and yet at the same time the son he could never be close to. Pop then sees his own son in a self-destructive light as “representative of his

generation, of the careless and wise-talking young men whom Pop saw about him all day” (56).

Pop represents an early manifestation of the fraught process where many blue-collar workers, who equate hard work and working class labour with an authentic expression of their identity, want their children to escape the drudgery and to succeed. However, this desire for their children to succeed raises the fear that by joining the professional classes they will become distant from their upbringing, somehow less ‘genuine’, and disconnected from their heritage. However, as Swados was keen to point out in his journalism and in *On the Line*, this division is an artificial one, which is ideologically conditioned, and is revealing about the ambiguous nature of class identity in the post-war years. The fear that their children are betraying their roots by entering into the white-collar professions does affirm the reality of class awareness, and themselves as working class. However, by regarding his own identity so narrowly through industrial labour, Pop prefigures the difficulties in articulating working class identity within a society that is becoming less reliant on production workers. And yet to accept that these new white-collar jobs are middle class, is to make an assumption based on spending power and the ability to consume rather than on any degree of agency in the workplace.

Like Pop, Orrin, the subject of the next chapter, also approaches his work with this masculine physical pride in his abilities, announcing that he can work overtime on a Sunday because, “I never go to church. Work is my religion” (60). Orrin believes in his role and his importance to the factory with an approach gleaned from his days in the Army: “He made some casual friends, he earned respect for his severity and his skill and his fortitude, and finally he achieved a kind of neutral balance on the line. This was

enough” (61). Pop and Orrin legitimise their labour through a belief in the nobility of their work that belies the actuality of their position. Both internalise their position by constructing narratives around their masculinity which draw upon a nostalgic idealisation of labour, at odds both with historical reality and with their current positions. Orrin, in particular, feels that he is a “key man”, telling Walter that ““There’s always what they call key men. I don’t care where it is, if those key men don’t hold their end ... things will fold”” (64). Yet after he is injured and relocated to light duties, he returns to look over the line and discovers that he is not missed: ““That’s your replacement,’ Harold said, ‘Not as good as you, but he knows his stuff. Life goes on, eh, Orrin? In point of fact, no matter what you do or how well you do it, there’s always somebody around waiting to take over”” (78). This brutal reminder of the reality of his position subverts Orrin’s internal monologue about his worth, and, destroyed, he reluctantly takes the offer of a position as a nightshift manager:

he thought of the energy that he’d poured down the drain on job after job until now he was thirty-three and with nowhere to retreat beyond this ugly place where he had made his last-ditch resistance. Now he was being asked to sign his unconditional surrender. (80)

The military metaphors are suggestive of Orrin’s state of mind, and indicate that he is still maintaining his internal illusion of masculinity. Once Orrin accepts the night shift, this narrative is reconfigured into an ambiguous coping mechanism, revolving around his masculinity and his equation of work with valuable military service in which he himself figures as the hero.

The chapters on Pop and Orrin highlight a paradoxical tension in their need to achieve a neutral position on the line that allows them to cope; this necessitates a simultaneous denial and legitimation of their work, in a series of attempts, never fully realised, to come to terms with the reality of factory life. This tension is symbolised in the next chapter by Harold, a recovering alcoholic, who works on the line in order to conquer his addiction. For Harold, the depersonalised nature of work is an ideal environment in which to deal with his dependency, and he works hard at denying the physical present: “The truth was that once his body had stopped complaining the automobile factory had no physical reality for Harold” (83). The absence of any physical reality is an illusion, but allows him to maintain a check on his alcoholism. The only difficulty he faces is coping with the relentless monotony and physical work on the line, and, like the other experienced workers, his means of coping is to deny the physical reality through his imagination: “In Harold’s case the trick of keeping his equilibrium on the line ... was in accepting the unreality of the present and forging ... a chain of the most delectable daydreams” (91). However, the need for dreams draws attention to the fact that factory work is not a cure for his alcoholism, but merely the substitution of one addiction for another:

The dreams, for all their insubstantiality and vagueness, were so sunny and delightful that, just as he used to wait impatiently for the liquor store to open, so now he could hardly wait for morning, to begin grinding and filing and buffing, and then gradually to immerse himself in the warm bath of the future, released at last from bondage to bottle or machine. (91)

By thinking of “the warm bath of the future”, Harold assumes a teleological view of his life in which manual labour will offer a realisation of his ‘true’ identity at some point in the future. However, the “insubstantiality and vagueness” of the dreams constantly undermines this belief, and all he achieves is an uneasy equilibrium between his dreams and the physical repetition of his work. Harold’s response is to volunteer for as much overtime as possible, but eventually, defeated, he returns to drink, just as Pop becomes an inspector and Orrin takes on the nightshift. This tension between the physical and mental spheres of factory life points to a false consciousness in working class identity. The alienating effects of the repetitive nature of physical labour are offset by the illusionary possibility of a better future, through such promises as promotion, a wage rise, the ability to buy consumer goods, and ultimately retirement. This tension is never resolved, just perpetually deferred. As a result, the novel shows how working class identity occupies an ambiguous space, between the potential of a future realisation of identity that will never arrive, and the negotiation of the mental and physical realities of the present.

The final two chapters can be read as two interrelated endings, offering a broader view of the shop floor from two different perspectives. Chapter Seven, ironically titled “Just One of the Boys”, is about Buster, who as a foreman, has moved out of the labouring class and into the lower echelons of middle management. The final chapter, ostensibly about Frank, implies Swados’ cautious validation of the union. As foreman, Buster occupies an ambiguous place in the factory: he draws a salary rather than a wage, does not wear coveralls, and has a management position over the workers on the line. However, he has very little authority to make decisions, and more often than not is used by various management departments to implement cost saving procedures. After twenty-

five years working in the plant, Buster's rationale for his continued presence is the small benefits his raised position allows; like Orrin, his reasoning is sustained by the belief that he is good at his job and is valued by management and his fellow workers. Yet the reality for Buster is that he has very little authority or respect, but is used purely as a tool of management; even the increased benefits he receives, as we will see below, hardly sustain any type of middle class lifestyle. One of the major costs to the worker in taking up a lower management position in the 1950s was that, due to new labour laws, he was forbidden to join the union. This left those like Buster in an uncertain position, shorn from any identification with the workers underneath them, yet lacking any authority or autonomy, or indeed a suitable salary, to be considered fully management. The story of Buster challenges the argument, put most strongly by Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology* that the working class was declining *because* of the rise of what Bell terms the "salarariat". For Bell, "the *proletariat* is being replaced by a *salarariat*, with a consequent change in the psychology of the workers". Bell argues that this shift was emerging through increased productivity from a smaller workforce and an increase in demand for goods and services, which "means the spread of more and more middle-class occupations" (221). This process is seen to have been intensified, particularly in the 1950s, by two developments: "the enormous rise in research and development", which has created a new "technical class"; and the "expansion of automation processes" which "result in the upgrading of skilled workers" (221). However, as the story of Buster reveals, this "upgrading" of a "technical class" does not automatically equate to these workers achieving middle class status at work, and nor does it necessarily mark a decline of the working class.

The last story, “Back in the Saddle Again”, appears, on the surface, to be a rather melodramatic vindication of the union. Frank is an older worker who left the old factory twenty years ago, and having seen his business fail, makes a reluctant return. Back in the 1930s, Frank’s relationship with the union was ambivalent, bordering on antagonistic, believing they were troublemakers. Now, when he returns, he is embarrassed to find that the union protects him, saving him from a lay-off by arguing that past service should be counted, and generally treats him with respect. Alan Wald points out that the end of the novel is significant in that it shows how Frank “realizes that, in spite of the rough stuff the union pulled on him back in the 1930s and 1940s, its struggle was just and it represents the only hope for dignity at the present” (337-8). However, this final chapter can be read more ambivalently – its tone as anxious, if not actually acerbic, where all the workers are rendered with a high degree of pathos.

Frank’s justification for his previous attitude – that “they wouldn’t let you be neutral back then” (122) – is also a critical comment on the present conditions. The use of the term neutral evokes the unease Swados felt about the Labour-Management Accord in the 1950s. While the unions had secured many rights for workers during the post-war period, there was a price to be paid in that the unions became complicit, to a certain extent, in perpetuating the reification of the industrial worker. Despite all the gains in labour contracts and conditions, *On the Line* is a tragic novel, empty of hope or promise. In one of the final scenes, Swados sets up Frank’s optimism against the reality of the factory. Frank, like other characters in the novel, invents a character for himself and narrates his situation to himself in positive terms. Looking round the factory, he thinks that “perhaps he belonged in the factory even more now than he had as a young man”,

and, noticing that increased automation will mean fewer workers, he thinks of himself returning as a witness to this transformation: “Who more logical to observe this gradual depopulation, this slow disappearance of the working class, than he himself, the prodigal who had returned to make his peace with the factory world?” (129 -130). Like the other workers, Frank is disassociating himself from his reality, and he sees himself as an observer with a unique history who is able to locate what he sees in “logical” terms, which echoes the observations of Daniel Bell. However, in keeping with Swados’ unease about the status and conditions of industrial labour, Frank’s observation is also an ironic elegy to the disappearance of industrial work and the working class subject as previously configured. As such, his illusions are immediately subverted as Frank is shifted from one menial job to another, and Swados introduces a rejoinder to Frank’s logic as he is quickly forced to contradict his previous statement; he does this however, like the other workers, by pretending to himself that the present is merely temporary: “Frank shrugged. The indeterminate. They, the planners and the engineers, were always devising more exhausting ways to do a dull job – it was one means of justifying their existence” (130). The final scene, with Frank and his family at the union picnic, happy and reconciled to the union, is tinged with elegiac pathos. In the final sentence, Frank and his wife walk along, “hand in hand, enfolding their grandchildren ... they strolled through the friendly throng toward the last little victory of the waning afternoon” (136). Yet the victory will be an empty, fleeting one, because, come Monday, Frank and all the others, at least those who have not been laid off, will be back on the line. The “waning afternoon” serves as a metaphor for Swados’ recognition of the beginning of the decline of the importance of the unions, if not of industrial work itself.



There is a strong narrative logic to *On the Line* that suggests that it is more than a series of sketches. The structure of the novel encourages a reading of the accumulative experience of factory work, mirroring the stages in which workers gradually become attuned to industrial labour, a reading that is encouraged further by Swados' device of introducing characters in the previous chapter to their own. Along the way, Swados challenges some of the prevalent ideas about labour and class in the 1950s. While the number of manual workers may have been slowly declining, the working class, if anything, was increasing in size, and no amount of recoding jobs or the promise of consumer products, could efface the reality that increased consumption requires increased production, and even the new white collar jobs were as demeaning and as demanding as work on the line. The characterisation in the novel, which veers between authentic 'portrayal' and symbolic representation, occasionally produces melodramatic effects. However, as I have suggested, there is a strong ironic strain running through the novel, as Swados undercuts his apparent confidence in his material, reflecting his own unease in writing on labour in a time of relative affluence.

### **The Happy Worker**

In his 1957 essay in the *Nation*, "The Myth of the Happy Worker", Swados opens by quoting from William Whyte's *The Organisational Man* where Whyte states that a gap has appeared between those who "make things" and the "important" work of the white-collar worker. Swados notes that current thinking on work gives "the impression ... that the problems of the workers in the background (or underground) have been stabilized, if not permanently solved" (*Radical's America* 111). But Swados detects an

even more important shift; the workers have not just been relegated to the background, as functional and controllable as machines, but have seemingly disappeared altogether: “The worker had died out like the passenger pigeon, or is dying out, or becoming acculturated like the Navajo”, and “if he is still around, he is just like the rest of us – fat, satisfied, smug, a little restless, but hardly distinguishable from his fellow TV-viewers of the middle class” (112). Indeed throughout the 1950s many in the media were at pains to emphasise the success of the American economy by celebrating the transition of the working class into the middle class, and Swados draws attention to a 1951 *Fortune* magazine article that argued that the “worker is to a remarkable extent a middle class member of a middle class society” (113). For Swados it seems that everyone agrees that “there are no workers left in America: we are almost all middle-class as to income and expectation” (112). Of course, his point here is the excessive stress on “income and expectation” (111). The worker may be better off than the 1930s, but the worker still works, and if anything, an increased income and the expectations of a middle class lifestyle, reinforced by the media and social scientists, actually exacerbate the alienation of the worker.

The challenge to working class identity through the perceived expansion of the middle-class had the effect of inducing shame and guilt among those who worked in factories, as if somehow they were only partial, or indeed failed, members of the middle class. Swados continues to argue in his article that, “The more a man is exposed to middle-class values, the more sophisticated he becomes and the more production-line work is degrading to him” (117). In *On the Line*, Kevin, who marvels at the factory, attempts to recount his experiences at work to the regulars at his local bar, but is quickly

rebuffed. They do not want to know, because Kevin is describing “a scene which was – if not actually unpleasant and lower-class – both familiar and boring” (15). Yet this is a working class bar, and the reluctance to discuss the factory not only reflects their tired familiarity with it, but is also symptomatic of a larger disassociation from any perceived working-class identity. Even in the factory itself the workers distance themselves from any identification with the place; as Joe explains to Walter, “No one who comes here wants to admit that the place has any real connection with his real life” (34).

Throughout the novel Swados evokes the temporary suspension of belief that each worker maintains, be they younger workers like Walter or Kevin who see their work as a means of saving for their ‘real’ careers, or older workers who have returned to factory work as a temporary measure, because of a failed business, or like Harold, as a means of battling his alcoholism. However, as Joe points out, this suspension is an illusion, and for most the work at the factory is inescapable:

It’s no fun to be doing time and be told that your sentence just might turn out to be indefinite. Then if you’ve got a good imagination you can see yourself getting used to it, even getting into the routine, so that one day follows another and the first thing you know the wrinkles are there and the kids are grown up and you don’t know where it has gone to, your life. (33)

Joe’s allusion to prison here is a strong trope throughout the novel, and often Swados foregrounds the relationship directly, as here where Harold is thinking about the factory:

It looked like nothing so much as a splendid, progressive new prison, conceived and executed by an architect who knew how to use glass and aluminum to conceal concrete pillboxes and whirling searchlights; at this moment he would not have

been at all surprised to hear the wail of a siren announcing his escape. How did I stick it out so long, he marvelled, how did I keep from going stir-crazy? (95)

Swados' connection between the factory and prison is taken from Bentham's panopticon, a design based on a factory built by his brother in Russia to build ships for Catherine the Great, which inspired Bentham to raise government funds to build a large five-storied panopticon containing both a prison and a factory. As Daniel Bell points out, Bentham's identification of factory and prison stems from his utilitarian mind – "a passion for order, and the elaboration of a calculus of incentives which, if administered in exact measures, would stimulate the individual to the correct degree of rectitude and work" (*End of Ideology* 228). The physical and ideological structures of industrialisation merged within the factory system and would inform the major structures of earlier twentieth century industrialisation associated particularly with Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford. But at the same time, Swados is drawing attention to the ideological function of the panopticon in the way it induces the subject to internalise capitalistic values, and (because of surveillance) to 'perform' these values, thereby undermining the potential for resistance.

However, what is crucial in *On the Line* is that the Fordist system is in decline, and the emergence of the post-industrial system will have important implications in reconfiguring the relationship between factories and the worker's identity. The factory in *On the Line*, based on the Ford Mahwah plant in New Jersey, is importantly located on the outskirts of an urban centre. Such sites heralded the shift of manufacturing in the post-war years away from a proximity to the centres of community and closer to major transport networks – a process that, along with increased mechanisation, disrupted entrenched forms both of management and of worker organisation. For the labour

novelist, the relocation and restructuring of the factory system presented a formidable set of problems. Historically, as we saw above, the labour novel could be written around a clearly defined community, where the factory provided an important focal point from which to build the narrative structure of the novel. In *On the Line* however, the factory is separated from any community. Alan Wald, concerned over the lack of a central character in the novel, suggests that:

It is tempting to argue that the auto plant itself is the main character. Yet the factory, unlike the beastlike coal mine in Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885), is insufficiently animated to serve such a central function; it is merely a steady functioning, machine that dominates, controls, and intrudes in the lives of workers. (337)

As Wald points out, as a potential central character, the factory, like the workers, lacks a 'full' presence, and this accounts for the style of the novel, particularly its lack of 'depth' and its collage-like representations, which reflect the new conditions of industrial production.

Swados' choice of location for his novel represents the vanguard of a new production and distribution network in the manufacturing industry. The Ford Mahwah plant in New Jersey was brand new, established in 1953 along with new plants in Louisville, Kentucky and San Francisco. It would be the company's largest assembly plant in the 1950s and 1960s, "producing 800 cars and 280 trucks daily" (Nevins 375). These three new plants were part of a major reorganisation of Ford after World War Two as the company attempted to rise to the challenges presented by reconversion and the United States' position in the global economy, and an attempt by Ford to recover from a

number of severe setbacks, at one point fighting nationalisation, and a U.S. market share that by 1941 had dropped to less than 20% (Rubenstein 90).

Henry Ford II, the 28-year-old grandson of Henry Ford, gained control of the company in 1945, and then in the 1950s embarked on a massive reorganisation. Along with other major automobile companies Ford's modernisation combined more efficient production and distribution systems with changes in marketing strategies. In terms of production "by the 1950s, sites were selected with access to recently built limited access highways" (Nevins 93). Thus production moved away from the traditional centres, especially in Detroit, and away from Henry Ford's preference for deep water sites. Assembly was dispersed around the country and particularly made use of the rail and road networks, which often meant that sites were established outside of communities and towns. The economic logic of this was further enhanced by the fact that it was cheaper to have ease of access for parts and the distribution of the finished product than to be easily accessible for workers.

Along with this reorganisation came an increase in automation. But as David Hounshell points out, "automation at Ford must be seen as an innovation within the Fordist production paradigm established in the second decade of the twentieth century – an intensification of mass production – rather than as a revolutionary break with the past" (51). The sense of alienation of the worker within the company and within the community was compounded as the tasks involved became increasingly abstract. Furthermore, the plants themselves became increasingly less autonomous as industrial and business units. As James Rubenstein has pointed out, "Ford's branch assembly plants historically held responsibility for both sales and production within a region, but

the two functions were separated, and new parts and distribution centers were built at different locations than the assembly plants” (91).

The intensification of mass production and the dispersal of the organisational structures of production and distribution had important effects within individual plants. In *On the Line*, as Buster is struggling to cope with another day on the line, he considers the changes wrought by the move of the plant:

But then the company built an enormous new plant out in the sticks, and after the big move Buster found that his problems were not only multiplied but infinitely more complicated than he had ever thought possible. In the old factory they had been building cars for over a quarter of a century. Everyone knew where everything was; everybody knew everybody else – almost, anyway. (99-100)

The physical distance between work as the point of production, and home as the site of consumption, facilitated an important shift in the way in which industrial labour was felt by the workers as a form of imprisonment. Laura Hapke notes that “Swados’ plant ... is severed from the old Detroit-area militance not only by its newness but by something else as well”. This “something else” Hapke identifies as the ‘contract’ whereby the workers, in return for high wages and secure contracts, “undergo a sort of voluntary imprisonment” in the factory (255). It is this “voluntary imprisonment”, predicated very much on the rise of a mass consumer culture and the ‘rights’ of the individual worker, which would provide the key for reconfigured relations within the new post-industrial society. The price paid for these higher wages – voluntary servitude – is however an ambiguous one. The freedom implied in this contract places an ideological burden on the worker, which is in direct contrast to the previous decades, where this burden fell on

factory owners. In the 1930s, with low wages and precarious work contracts, there was a justification for demanding from business a fairer deal. These demands for basic rights encouraged the identification with, and a valorisation of, working class ethics: of the worker as engaging in a job that, while not altogether life affirming, nonetheless had a kind of rectitude and integrity about it. Unions were not fighting for higher pension contributions or increased holidays, but for the basic rights; workers were not working to save for a holiday, a new car, or to go to college, but for a basic subsistence. However, in the 1950s there was a reversal in this relationship, and unions were perceived as corrupt, and workers as relatively highly paid employees who had ‘volunteered’ for this type of work.

As Swados makes clear in his fiction and journalism, it is this perceived freedom of choice, compounded by the social pressures of the presentation and maintenance of a middle class lifestyle, which was central to the decline of the perceived importance of manual labour. While many workers did purchase goods that were considered ‘luxury’ items, such goods generally formed a small proportion of their expenditure, and for many workers, their wages were spent on essentials; it was frequently the possibility that luxury items *could* be bought that was fetishized. Increasingly, however, the distinction between luxury items and necessities became blurred, especially as the burgeoning advertising industry effaced the distinction between the two, marketing necessities in luxury styles and models, and luxuries as necessities.

This process was particularly strong in the 1950s in the marketing of automobiles, as the new location of the factories turned the car into a necessity for the workers to get to work. As *Automobile Facts* maintained in the 1950s, “Auto makers are still ready to



provide stylish, dependable transportation in an economy package, but today's average buyer clearly wants and is willing to pay for that 'something extra' that will set his car apart" (Nevins 381). Furthermore the automobile was yoked to a general way of life and identity – "The kind of automobile that is sold epitomizes our standard of living. People want ... better cars, better houses, better clothes" (Nevins 382). Car manufacturers responded, and created new models across the range of prices – establishing the now common categories such as 'mid price' and 'luxury' with their own ambiguous language (Nevins 375ff). The added advantage for manufacturers in locating their factories away from urban and residential areas was that it encouraged workers to buy cars, through company credit and discounts, in order to travel to work, thus ensuring a steady customer base who needed to work to pay off their debt. This is a point that Swados is keen to draw attention to in *On the Line*: when Kevin leaves work the first day he is faced with the problem of remembering where he parked his car:

There were ten rows, each row with nearly a hundred automobiles toed up to the white stripe, and in the waning afternoon it was very hard to tell them apart. Almost all were the same make, almost all were recent models, and all were streaked and spotted with the drying remnants of the day's rain. (23)

Moreover, the relationship between the workers and the automobiles is different inside the factory to the outside. The trim department is the point where the alienation of the worker from the finished product is most marked: "where the gleaming new-born autos were fitted out with glittering chrome ornamentation and accessories as they filed in stately procession past the seemingly humble and dirty workers" (14). Yet at the same time, it was never easier for the workers to purchase on them, as Walter explains to Kevin

who is thinking of saving up to buy one: “I guess you never heard of financing. Nine out of ten people nowadays can’t afford to pay cash. All you need is a trade-in, or a down payment”. Moreover, as Walter goes on to explain, the factory actually encourages the workers to buy through discounts: “all you have to do is show a dealer your badge and he has to sell you a car for his price plus ten per cent. You’ll save quite a few hundred dollars that way” (19).

For Kevin, as Swados’ naïve outsider, this system of being able to purchase an automobile, combined with the mystique of the factory system, is everything he has dreamed about the United States: he “felt he had found America, the vastness and variety and magic efficiency of it, in the factory” (15). This “magic efficiency” of course was predicated on a disingenuous logic. Rather than the elimination of mass production and the expansion of “expectations”, what Swados and other critics were pointing out was in fact exactly the opposite. This tension between aspiration and actuality was an important one for Swados, particularly as there was a degree of ambiguity affixed to it. As he points out, workers’ middle class aspirations were “the rock on which socialist agitation had foundered for generations: it proved useless to tell the proletarian that he had a world to win when he was reasonably certain that with a few breaks he could have his own gas station” (*Radical’s America* 115). The post-war economic structure compounded this relationship, in that the ideological belief central to the consumer culture was that these expectations had widened, when in fact, as Swados argued, “If these expectations have changed at all in recent years, they would seem to have narrowed rather than expanded” (115). Swados’ use of the term “narrowing” therefore plays on the ambivalent nature of these goods – they are more readily available than owning your own business, but are

also less meaningful and more transient. While the purchase of these products gives the illusion of a middle class lifestyle, it is never achieved with any permanence. The nature of consumer goods is that they always need replacing and this perpetuates the necessity of work and the attachment to financial commitments, such as the instalment plan, which not only accentuates the drudgery of industrial work but also places these middle class aspirations constantly out of reach.

In *On the Line*, Joe points out the relationship between production and consumption, whereby the “big pitch” of America is that “we’ve proved to all the impractical European dreamers that production can serve people. But instead people are serving production” (38). He then explains that when the line stops, and there is a huge sales demand, the bosses become “hysterical” and they cannot see the effects on the worker. Of course, when sales demand dries up “they give you the opposite story”. So Joe then asks whether you can blame the “poor slob in the middle for suspecting that the whole setup is really nutty as a fruitcake, and for feeling ashamed of himself for being caught up in it?” At this point Swados touches on the catch-22 situation workers find themselves in, for in response to Walter’s question as to who exactly is crazy, Joe replies:

Anybody who gets suckered into believing that there’s anything real behind the billboards they put up to get the show on the road, so that he commits himself to buying the billboard pictures by selling his life on the instalment plan. I sympathise with any joker who begins to suspect that the whole world is against him, that he’s the victim of a huge conspiracy organized to make his car fall apart before it’s been paid off. Doesn’t life in the factory seem to be deliberately designed to lower your self esteem? (38)

Swados' notion that work lowers self-esteem because of its essential absurdity resonates with Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, also written in the 1950s. Like Swados, Goodman had similar problems of critical reception through making this argument, and he failed to find a publisher until the 1960s. The tension of the absurdity of work and consumption is sustained by the internalisation of the contradiction into self-denial and self-hatred, a point Walter realises immediately after this talk with Joe. He begins to understand that his response to being bawled out by Buster for poor work is the same as everybody else's: "to swear at himself for the mistakes that had made him fall behind, to realize how he was being trapped into swearing at himself and deflecting his anger from what he did to the way that he did it" (39).

This self-denial and self-hatred also operates within the complex management structure, as Buster himself is subject to the same process. Buster is informed by the time and motion 'experts' that the line will be reorganised, and yet it quickly causes problems as they have not taken into account Orrin's absence from the line, or the lack of expertise of the newer workers. The line quickly falls behind and Buster spends the day frantic and exhausted – he isn't even allowed to help out, as this would break union rules – and subjected to abuse and jeering from the workers. The time and motion people have disappeared, and refuse to take any further interest in the line. Eventually Buster has no option but to help out on the line. At the end of the day when he goes to the washroom to clean up, he ruminates on his impossible situation:

He looked like Before, but he felt like After, long After. And what would you do if you threw it all over? Who could you tell to go to hell? Yourself? That nameless herd who came and went like stockyard cattle? That clique of Masons

who boosted each other and each other's relatives into all the key jobs, and would one day make him an assistant supervisor, or a foreman over the body shop foreman, just to satisfy the Michigan crowd that they were bringing up men from the ranks? (115)

Buster, as representative of Bell's new middle class *salariat*, does not have any of the autonomy that is supposedly attached to this 'professional' class; nor does he appear to find fulfilment in his domestic life, despite having some of the trappings of the middle class:

Weary and pensive, he got in his car and crawled home to the new development where his house stood on an artificially winding black-top road, in the middle of what had been a potato field two years before. As he coasted up the driveway he caught sight of his wife outside the kitchen door, hanging the laundry on the aluminium and nylon cord dryer that he'd mounted in concrete for her, a temporary expedient which would have to be replaced one day soon by an automatic dryer. (116)

In travelling home from work, Buster is also making the transition from the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption. His managerial position has left him no different from the manual workers, as he is weary, but he is also pensive, which suggests his return home is troubled. The 'crawl' home indicates that, despite claims to the contrary, work in the ranks of the *salariat* is insular and deadening. When at home, Buster's attention is immediately drawn to future tasks and future consumption, such as the new automatic dryer, not to the rest or relaxation that a middle class ideology promises. When he takes a bath, he makes a symbolic transition from work to home:

He closed his eyes, took his nose by thumb and forefinger, and eased himself under the circling water. When he came up his wife had stopped talking, and he stepped from the tub, cleaner at least, to prepare himself for dinner and the evening. (116)

However, this is a fleeting moment, one that cleanses, but one that also suggests submerging and a denial of his self at home as well as at work.

### **The Labour Novel in an Age of Plenty**

In Irving Howe's 1979 lecture to mark the opening of the Harvey Swados papers at the University of Massachusetts Library he admits that he, and his fellow critics, did not rate *On the Line* at the time it was published, but that he has now changed his opinion. Howe feels that "*On The Line* reads well now ... And it reads well for reasons some of us thought it read poorly twenty years ago". The reasons that Howe gives – a "thinness of outline" and "lack of circumstantial substance" – from a later perspective appear to be strengths, as they "evoke not so much the men as their situations. *On the Line* now appears to be one of Swados' most successful experimental works" ("On Harvey Swados" 640). At this point, Howe appears to be recognising Swados' success in adapting literary form to the specific circumstances of the 1950s. However, Howe then undercuts this by saying that Swados was an "unfashionable novelist, committed to the tradition of realism", (641) and later, that Swados' fiction is permeated by his "memory of an older politics" (645). The confusion here possibly stems from Howe's own "memory of an older politics", in that he fails to recognise that realism is not a clearly defined, and historically specific, form. In fact, the style of *On the Line*, the collage-like

nature of each story, the sketchiness of character, and the lack of 'depth', can be interpreted as the incorporation of modernist techniques, which produces exactly what Howe praises: the novel's ability to depict the situation of workers in the 1950s. Howe's failure, or refusal, to acknowledge that the boundaries of literary form are not fixed, and that Swados was able to adapt literary form to material conditions, suggests the limitations of his and fellow New York intellectuals' own political and literary arguments in the post-war years.

The critical reception of *On the Line* draws attention to the fact that writing creative literature on work and labour has always presented difficulties for writers and that the aesthetics of labour are particularly complex. More often than not aesthetic pleasure is sought as a respite from work, and there is a strong feeling that, as Michael Denning points out in relation to the work of Dos Passos, "Work is always a break, an interruption, in the narrative, never its source ... work never makes 'good fiction'" (188). It is not that work makes a poor subject for art, but that it is an area of life that workers especially would rather forget, and this presents a conundrum for labour writers. In *On the Line* Joe explains to Walter that "'the basis of the best art [is] the fact that you recognise yourself in it, and all those inner experiences that you'd thought no one else but you could know'" (39). In the context of Joe's romanticised radicalism, honed through the 1930s and 1940s, this statement is, of course ironic. Whereas in the 1930s fiction on labour struggles would resonate with workers, by the 1950s industrial work, as we have seen, brings with it a high degree of shame. Compounding this difficulty for the writing of labour fiction in the 1950s was the changed nature of the reality of industrial work, which had important implications for realism.

In Howe's lecture on Swados, after highlighting Swados' preference for realism, he goes on to suggest that "traditional realism brings with it – especially at a time when the commonly shared sense of what our society is and does tends to be fuzzy – the risks of banal enumeration, passive recording, dispirited portraiture" (640). Yet the paradox here is that this description captures precisely the reality of labour; as Swados' work shows, industrial labour is a "banal" "passive" and "dispirited" experience. But the assumption, which is implicit in many of the New York intellectuals' arguments, that this can only be portrayed through an obsolete "traditional realism", is strongly symptomatic of their identification of the working class with industrial labour and their separation between "traditional realism" and "moral realism". The New York intellectuals were positioning themselves as radical critics of society, but in their critique of consumerism and mass society they adopted an elite 'radical' aesthetic that not only aligned them to a certain extent with the very culture they were critiquing, but blinded them to the existence of a working class that laboured *and* consumed – a point that Swados was at pains to make clear:

But in the decade following the war intellectuals have discovered that workers are no longer either building socialism or forging the tools of victory. All they are doing is making the things that other people buy. That, and participating in the great commodity scramble. The disillusionment, it would seem, is almost too terrible to bear. Word has gotten around among the highbrows that the worker is not heroic or idealistic; public opinion polls prove that he wants barbecue pits more than foreign aid and air conditioning more than desegregation, that he doesn't particularly want to go on strike, that he is reluctant to form a Labor



Party, that he votes for Stevenson and often for Eisenhower and Nixon – that he is, in short, animated by the same aspirations as drive the middle-class onward and upward in suburbia. (115)

Swados' point here is that, while the conditions for workers have changed, it is the intellectuals' *perception* of workers, generated by their own ambivalent politics that has resulted in the effacement of the working class, and ironically, this aligns the intellectuals with the bourgeois culture they are attempting to critique. In part, Swados suggests, this is the result of the emergence of the new professional class of intellectuals and academics who are woefully distanced from the realities of the workplace. In his essay "The Image in the Mirror" he suggests sarcastically that "The cult of experience, so castigated as one of the literary fallacies of the Thirties, is apparently being replaced in the Fifties by the cult of inexperience" (*Radical's America* 217-218).

Swados' contribution to post-war culture is his recognition that industrial labour forms one part of a working class that is, as it always has been, extremely heterogeneous, and which, in responding to historical change, is in a constant state of becoming. The decline of the industrial worker, which was as much a mythical belief as an actual analysis, increasingly became a metonym for the decline of the working class. But for Swados, while he accepts that the industrial work force may be declining, the belief that these workers are being eclipsed by an emerging middle class is deeply flawed and fails to acknowledge that this new middle class is merely a reconfiguration of the working class – or alternatively a "proletarianization of the middle class" (*Radical's America* 118). The work of the new middle class is, like Buster's in *On the Line*, no more rewarding than industrial labour and equally lacking in any sense of ownership or

responsibility. In a 1956 article in *Dissent*, “Exurbia Revisited”, Swados argues that “even as the sheer numerical mass of the proletariat – or at least its percentile proportion to the rest of the population – is shrinking, its stigmata are perhaps being transferred to the swelling millions of suburbanites and exurbanites”. What, he asks, is the difference between the worker’s alienation from his labour and “the communications industry operator dealing in ‘intangibles’, able to handle twelve martinis but with no more proof than the worker at the end of the weary day that he has produced anything at all?”

(*Radical’s America* 249)

As a writer and journalist working outside the mainstream press or the academy, Swados’ attempts to draw attention to these problems only achieved marginal critical recognition; as Alan Wald points out, “Swados’ work was admired, but his audience was small” (340). His analyses of work, class and culture, however, have proven to be extremely prescient. The increasing alienation in supposedly middle class work, the rise of short term contracts and the decline of trade unions have all continued to sustain the belief in a classless society. In his 1961 essay in *The Atlantic Monthly*, “The Jungle Revisited”, Swados is already aware of the way in which American wealth is being created not only on the back of dehumanising labour at home, but increasingly through the Third World, “at a stupendous cost in human suffering” (*Radical’s America* 11). In another essay in 1961, “The Dilemma of the Educated Woman”, Swados points out that the majority of the new white-collar proletariat is female, and this is in inverse proportion to the number of women in the professions. His solution to both problems, calling for the establishment of centres to help in child-care and the expansion of adult education centres, again suggests that Swados, unlike many intellectuals of the 1950s, was driven

less by ideological fixations than by a strong commitment to social justice. That his fiction was only marginally successful is indicative of the culture he was writing against. As such, his fiction and journalism stand as important insights into the redevelopment of the cultural understanding, and representations, of labour and class at a crucial transitional moment.

## Chapter Four

### Working Class Identity and the Transformation of American Capitalism in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*

Harriette Arnow's 1954 novel *The Dollmaker*, in its dramatisation of the demographic, social and cultural upheavals faced by workers during World War II, captures the early moments of the post-war transformation of American capitalism and its effects on working class identity. The novel tells the story of Gertie and Clovis Nevels and their family as they move from Kentucky to Detroit during World War II. The experiences of the Nevels family in Detroit, where Clovis finds work because of the war-time boom in industrial production and the shortage of labour, is in stark contrast to their rural Kentucky home. The juxtaposition of the agrarian South and the industrial North, and the traumatic effects of life in Detroit, expose the dehumanising and alienating conditions of industrialism. Although Arnow avoided taking any overt political or ideological positions, and was particularly hostile to Marxism, the novel offers a comprehensive critique of capitalism that extends well beyond an exposé of the alienation of industrial labour. In particular, the novel probes the rise of a credit economy, the pressures of a consumer society combined with the breakdown of local communities, and the way these developments effected a fragmentation of working class identity and consciousness. Equally, in the early parts of the novel, where Arnow depicts the way of life in rural Kentucky, and in the manner in which the Nevels' difficulties in adjusting to life in Detroit are portrayed, Arnow cautions against romanticising the South as some idyllic antithesis to industrialisation. The depictions of the backwardness of rural Kentucky, its lack of resources and infrastructure, the prevalence of strong

fundamentalist religious beliefs, limited education, and the patriarchal community structure, present a society that is, in its own way, as restrictive and limiting as the industrial North. Arnow's refusal to valorise the South accentuates the tragedy in the novel, as the only means of coping with the harsh conditions in Detroit is Gertie's naïve nostalgia for Kentucky, which ignores the poverty and the patriarchal structures that denied her any autonomy, and which were responsible for her move to Detroit. The tragedy of the Nevels family's dissolution in Detroit is symptomatic of the fragmentation of working class identity during the 1940s and 1950s in the face of the transformation of the United States' economy and society. The novel offers a dramatisation of the way in which the potential for a mass working class consciousness during the mid-twentieth century was thwarted through the hegemonic ideology of liberal capitalism exploiting regional, racial, ethnic, and gender differences. The novel further suggests that these divisions were sustained through the emergence of a post-Fordist economy based on consumerism and credit that consolidated the ideological belief in the United States as a middle class society.

The white Southern migration North during the middle of the twentieth century had a profound effect on the composition of the American working class. James Gregory has argued that this mass migration of Southern white workers, particularly those from the border South and the Appalachians, to the North during World War II contributed to what he calls the "Southernizing of the American working class". The transference of Southern culture, especially Protestantism, family values, and conservative agrarian politics, into the mainly Catholic blue collar North "would play roles in the reorganization of northern politics, contributing to the rise of organized working-class

conservatism” (136). However, on the evidence of *The Dollmaker*, this conservatism may not be so much a readymade political belief imported into the North, as something which emerges from the interaction of various groups in industrial centres such as Detroit. Here, the ideology of capitalism is able to manipulate differences in these groups – whether regional, racial, ethnic, gender and religious – and at the same time encourage a nostalgia for a mythical ‘home’. However, Gertie’s longing for Kentucky, like all the characters’ need to be elsewhere, is driven by a desire to find a community that she cannot find in Detroit, and as such becomes an unstable and ambiguous desire. The values she cherishes – home, family and community – become mythical ideals that subsequently become incorporated into the conservative ideology of middle class society, foreclosing the recognition of the potential working class solidarity in Detroit.

The central theme of the novel, the Nevels’ adjustment to Detroit, is sometimes interpreted as symbolic of the destruction of the agrarian Southern tradition by industrialisation, but the Nevels’ assimilation also involves a transference of values and beliefs to the North. The hostility towards the Nevels and other Southern immigrants in Detroit by the indigenous workers reveals a much more complex relationship between the two groups, especially as these Southern migrants display an equal hostility to their northern neighbours. The novel dramatises the process whereby competition for scarce economic resources is played out in the cultural realm, primarily focusing on regional and religious differences. However, the Southern Protestants, like the Nevels, and the Northern Catholics, actually share fundamental belief systems, particularly in a strong work ethic, the importance of religious observation and in the patriarchal family unit. While economic hardship has the potential to foster class awareness, in fact it exploits

cultural difference, so that the neighbours in Merry Hill end up competing against each other in order to establish a legitimate cultural and social identity that is compensatory for their socio-economic subjugation. These conflicts in *The Dollmaker*, mediated through issues such as individualism, the claim on 'whiteness', respectability, and the ownership of consumer goods, presages the tensions in the post-war period in which the development of working class consciousness and identity was frustrated by the hegemonic ideology of classlessness, consensus, and consumerism. What the novel illustrates is how economic competition, sublimated into cultural and social differences, accentuates the process of the de-radicalisation of the working class.

The close identification of Arnow as a Southern writer can obscure the more expansive themes of *The Dollmaker*, beyond the effects of industrialisation on Southern communities. Gertie's obsession with the figure of Judas has been interpreted as representing fear of the betrayal of both her heritage and her female identity. But the novel suggests that this betrayal is a complex act. Betrayal stems from the word traitor whose etymological root is *traditor*, meaning to hand over, and in this sense Gertie's experiences in the North suggest that her failures stem from an opposition between a secure home and a community that is an alien 'other'. However, as the novel indicates, Gertie's identity is, like that of other immigrants in the North, situated uncertainly between the two places, and this has important implications for the development of working class consciousness in Detroit. Gertie's final act, of breaking apart her carving, is neither fully redemptive nor fully a betrayal, but rather indicates Arnow's insight into the ambiguous and precarious nature of working class identity in the 1940s and 1950s.

### **The Critical Reception of *The Dollmaker***

*The Dollmaker* is the final novel in what is referred to as Arnow's "Kentucky Trilogy", following *Mountain Path* (1936) and *Hunter's Horn* (1949). The two earlier novels focus entirely on rural Kentucky and chart the effects of accelerated industrialisation and modernity on these poor communities. By World War II Arnow, herself having lived in Detroit, noticed how the migration from the South was having a permanent impact on Kentucky communities. As she was writing *The Dollmaker* during the 1940s she began to recognise that "the permanent move the men made by bringing their wives and children to the cities" was a final migration. The result of this, she felt, was that "hill life was gone forever, and with it, I suppose, a personal dream of community I'd had since childhood and have been trying ever since to recapture in my writing" (Baer 117). Arnow's concern over the social fragmentation resulting from the demographic shifts during World War II, and her vision of community, are major themes in the novel, but they operate more ambiguously than many critics have allowed – particularly in the way in which her idea of community has been read purely as a humanistic desire. As an example of what Alan Wald has termed the "de-fanging" of radical novels in the 1940s and 1950s, *The Dollmaker* has attracted liberal humanist readings which have ignored the important issues of class consciousness and class division that are crucial in understanding the fragmented community that Arnow depicts in Detroit. Arnow's Southern background has also contributed to these readings, encouraging a view of the novel as envisioning some rural idyllic past as the solution to the social and economic despair in Detroit. While Gertie does dream of a mythical South, this proves to be both ineffectual and dangerous – her inability to think beyond the



narrow confines of her upbringing are shown to be a major cause of many of the Nevels' troubles. In fact, the failure of any of the characters to find a secure sense of community can be read as an indictment of mid-century capitalism, and articulates the ways in which ideological currents that persisted through the transformation from Fordism to post-industrialism thwarted the potential for the raising of working class consciousness.

Although widely praised on publication, and placed runner-up to Faulkner's *The Fable* for the National Book Award, *The Dollmaker* disappeared from critical view. The first substantial study, in 1974, William Eckley's Twayne's Author's Series edition on Arnow, only served to reinforce the opinion that Arnow was a minor regional writer, and offers an extremely vague understanding of her work. According to Eckley, Arnow,

as a realist who rejects such things as experimental forms, complex plots, sentimental themes, the pyrotechnics of sex, and the contemporary mania for neurotic protagonists ... combines in her work a penetrating and sensitive insight into the human condition with a lean prose style. (122)

This reading of Arnow's work not only fails to acknowledge the social and economic class disparities depicted by Arnow, but also refuses to interrogate its own class assumptions. Eckley's argument, that Arnow's work offers a "sensitive insight into the human condition", is a blasé liberal humanist reading, replete with bourgeois middle class assumptions about culture and identity.

A collection of critical essays on Arnow from 1995, edited by Haeja K. Chung, has opened up the novel to broader critical interpretations, and particularly to feminist perspectives on Arnow's work. But, despite the renewed attention, there still appears to be a certain marginalisation of Arnow through an emphasis on her regional identity, at

the expense of recognizing the broader implications of her work in engaging with the redevelopment of the working class beyond the South. The strong identification of Arnow with the South is difficult to overcome, despite the fact that her most well regarded and successful novel, *The Dollmaker*, is set primarily in Detroit. This perception is encouraged, not only by Arnow's own attachment to the South and the fact that the majority of her work is located there, but by the fact that Arnow, like her fictional family the Nevels, is from a region that has a particular cultural resonance that is not only distinctive, but is very rarely considered beyond its regional boundaries. As Chung points out in her Introduction, "ironically, her stinging realism has been seen as evidence of her regionalism, evidence that she is of the Cumberland – an area somehow more 'regional' than others might be" (3). The cultural perception of rural Kentucky is an extreme version of the cultural stereotypes associated with the South. Due to the extreme poverty of the Cumberland, the region tends to be regarded in terms of a historical version of the South, which frequently affects interpretations of modern Southern literature. Sharon McKern in *Redneck Mothers, Good Ol' Girls and Other Southern Belles*, draws attention to the stereotypes that pervade criticism of Southern literature:

In earlier years, nearly all the classic Southerners were: Margaret Mitchell's belles and gentleman soldiers; William Faulkner's half-wits and nymphomaniacs; Erskine Caldwell's low-rent po' white trash; Richard Wright's maimed blacks. Toss in one faithful mammy, a rawboned moonshiner or two, a stoic black cook gifted with rare-but-simple human wisdom, and you've got it: the celebrated Old South was one long Tobacco Road save for the carefree aristocrats gamboling on Tara's lush lawns. (10)

Distortions of Arnow's fiction through the prism of these cultural stereotypes are evident, even in contemporary criticism, where Kentucky is viewed as a rural, almost idyllic, pastoral landscape, and the passive victim of industrialisation. Joan Griffin, for example, in a 1987 essay on Arnow, "Geography as Destiny in Harriette Arnow's Kentucky Trilogy", argues that:

Arnow gives her readers not only a richly detailed, evocative picture of a region in decline, but also a painfully accurate account of people caught in the stampede of time. Ultimately, more is lost than gained as the wheels of progress grind their way into the Kentucky backhills, irrevocably changing the region and its people ... it is indeed a tragic story that Arnow's Kentucky trilogy has to tell. (95)

Griffin sets up a timeless idyllic pastoral community against a modernising capitalistic industrial society, and in doing so renders both the South and North as fixed entities, and risks losing sight of the complexity of Arnow's trilogy. The first two novels deal with two completely separate communities within Kentucky, and of course *The Dollmaker* is set almost entirely in Detroit. In the 1963 "Introduction" to her 1936 Novel *Mountain Path*, Arnow cautions against romanticising rural Kentucky by pointing out that "the roadless back hill communities knew only an all encompassing poverty of environment", and that the benefits of education, transport and medicine were only available in towns which often might "have been hundreds of miles away" (Chung 243). Despite the brutal conditions in Detroit, Arnow is ambivalent about making a clear comparison between the relative benefits of Kentucky and Detroit. Although she has "no brief for wartime housing projects built by the government", she accepts that "life in these was better than

in the slums or in company-owned housing in a coal mining camp in Eastern Kentucky” (“Letter to Barbara Rigney” 147). She has also gone on record to warn against critics overly sympathising with Gertie through this romanticisation of the South, arguing that “there were thousands and thousands of women who were happy to go with their husbands and have all the gadgets they could get and get away from the drudgery of living in an electricity-less community” (Chung 267). In fact, Arnow points out that “Gertie’s problems in the city and in the hills came from herself” (“Letter” 147). Gertie’s failure to successfully negotiate the difficulties she encounters in both Kentucky and Detroit is symptomatic of a more complex set of problems in the novel, in which regional differences are shown to be a major contributing factor in the dissipation of working class consciousness in the 1940s. The regional differences in *The Dollmaker* should not be read as oppositional cultures *per se*, with the South as a ‘victim’ of the North, as to do so is to replicate the stereotyped categories that the novel critiques.

The strong association of *The Dollmaker* with the South not only deflects attention away from the more complex class themes in the novel, but has also limited the way in which the novel is perceived within the broader literary history of the American novel. Michael Denning, in his comprehensive study of mid twentieth century working class culture, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture*, identifies *The Dollmaker* as one of the major cultural texts that charts the decline of working class radicalism in the 1940s and 1950s and the victory of American capitalism. For Denning – who recognises the important class aspects of the novel – *The Dollmaker* is “the great proletarian novel of mid-century”, and yet, as he points out, it is “rarely recognized as such” (36). Rather than consigning the novel to a specific regional genre, Denning

argues that, as an “epic narrative” of the migration North, *The Dollmaker* compares favourably to *The Grapes of Wrath* (36). Steinbeck’s novel has retained its popularity, and its position as a major American novel, primarily due to its engagement with a more culturally powerful mythic journey than *The Dollmaker*. California, Denning notes, “had long seemed a promised land to the nation, and the betrayal of that promise gave *The Grapes of Wrath* much of its dramatic power” (264). The migration in *The Dollmaker*, however, has more ambiguous more subtle, implications, particularly in terms of the development of working class identity. Joyce Carol Oates, who also considers the *The Dollmaker* as important as *The Grapes of Wrath*, makes another useful comparison outside of a regional interpretation by comparing it with Hubert Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Although Oates feels that Arnow’s novel lacks the explicit violence and sexual frankness of Selby’s novel, which if “superimposed” on Arnow’s novel “would give us, probably, a more truthful vision of Detroit”, (608) this comparison begins to free *The Dollmaker* from more parochial critical interpretations. Locating *The Dollmaker* within a tradition of writing that includes *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* opens up possibilities in gaining a more effective understanding of the broader transformation of working class identity in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly through the effects of migration. Moreover, reading such novels as *The Dollmaker* against the grain of regionalism, and making less superficially obvious connections between novels, offers a means of challenging the literary canon that still retains the imprint of the ideology liberal consensus from the 1940s and 1950s.

The style of *The Dollmaker* also complicates attempts to assimilate the novel into the mainstream canon, in that it does not conform readily to any of the genres, or more

precisely the interpretation of genres – primarily naturalism, realism, modernism, and ‘dark humour’ – that were established in the post-war period. While the Southern elements in the novel have obviously encouraged its identification as a Southern pastoral novel, it is much more than this. Michael Denning identifies *The Dollmaker* as a combination of an “Appalachian pastoral with a Detroit proletarian tragedy” (264). This definition provides a better means of understanding the tradition within which to place *The Dollmaker*. The identification of the influences of the Southern pastoral *and* the proletarian novel in *The Dollmaker* raises another possible reason why the novel has been marginalised, as the combination of the two confounds the ‘traditional’ (regional and political) boundaries usually associated with these terms. Haeja Chung, who makes a similar observation to Denning in relation to Arnow’s influences, suggests that Arnow exhibits a “curious fusion” of the proletarian naturalism and realism of such social protest writers as James T. Farrell and Erskine Caldwell, and the Fugitive writers of the Southern Renaissance, including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Warren (102). This combination is unusual in that the two traditions are politically antithetical: the Fugitive writers being conservative, and reactionary, and the proletarian novel strongly associated with left-wing radicalism. However, rather than viewing these political stances as negatively affecting a clear political vision in *The Dollmaker*, or as competing with each other, one can see their co-existence as exposing the way in which post-war capitalism was able to manipulate, and appropriate, these two political positions. In particular, this co-existence dramatises the way cultural working class values were appropriated to ameliorate the harsh economic effects of capitalism by encouraging such values as home, family, religious belief and patriotism. As such, the novel replicates the very tensions in

working class identity in the 1940s which would have such a transforming effect in the post-war period.

The setting of the novel in Detroit also draws attention to the ways in which regional differences, this time between urban centres, have contributed to the decline of working class cultural and political expression. Detroit, while one of the major twentieth century industrial centres (in many senses it defined American industrial strength and progress), was a relatively new city with very little cultural history. As Henry Miller wrote in *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*, “You wouldn’t suspect that there was such a thing as a soul if you went to Detroit. Everything is too new, too slick, too bright, too ruthless” (42). Laurence Goldstein has pointed out that Detroit differs from many other cities, such as New York, in failing to provide a landscape for a sustained cultural or literary critique of capitalism. For Goldstein, the literary history of New York developed, in part, through the contradictions between Walt Whitman’s poetic renditions of America’s manifest destiny and its collective greed for wealth. This preference for wealth *in itself*, divorced from material production, provided for a tradition of resistance, for example, in Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* or John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*. In Detroit, however, according to Goldstein, “wealth *per se* was never a fundamental issue ... instead it was a technological paradise revolving around the evangelical efforts of Henry Ford” (271). As such, literature from Detroit was “drowned by the advertising and marketing of the automobile industry” so that the

consciousness of a whole generation before World War II was informed by these futurist appeals to its faintly-repressed fantasies of sensual gratification and social domination ....The view from the top had prevailed so easily because neither in

Detroit nor anywhere else in Michigan had there ever been a literary tradition.

(274)

It is the sheer dominance of ‘naked’ capitalism in Detroit, devoid of any cultural history, which presents problems for writers in how to articulate a response to the conditions in the city which could resonate with a national working class identity. In fact, there is only one other major novel set in Detroit in the mid twentieth century, also written by an outsider, Celine’s *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932). The failure by many literary critics to treat Detroit as the central subject of *The Dollmaker*, preferring to read the novel as a Kentuckian perspective *on* Detroit, is symptomatic of the cultural isolation of Detroit in the mid-twentieth century, and draws attention to how regional stereotypes have adversely affected the development of a national cultural, and political, working class awareness. This problem is also evident in Goldstein’s article when he refers to the Nevels’ “sensually and emotionally fulfilling farm life in Kentucky”, which is a romantic reading of the novel and bears little relation to Arnow’s depiction of the Nevels’ Kentucky life.

Melvyn Dubofsky, in his assessment of why the left failed to capitalise on the economic crises of the 1930s and declined in influence from the 1940s, identifies the geographical size of the United States, and the vast regional differences, as a major factor. For Dubofsky, “geography, could, and did, easily dilute the impact of industrial conflict nationally. The United States lacked a London, Paris, Berlin, or Rome, where massive, militant strikes directly affected the national state as well as private employers” (139). Dubofsky’s assessment of the importance of geography is equally important in understanding the failure to form a national working class literary tradition in the United



States after the 1930s. While the major centres or regions, New York and California, have produced a strong body of cultural texts that critique American capitalism, they have been localised within the particular mythologies of the two coasts: the cosmopolitan international centre on the East coast, and the individualism embedded in the frontier myth of Westward expansion. Regions and cities are disparate in terms of environment and certain cultural heritages, but American capitalism and business thinks, and operates, nationally. While there may be regional and local differences in some respects, the experience of low wages, inadequate labour protection, unemployment, discrimination, and economic insecurity, for instance, ought to constitute a shared culture and social awareness.

While Arnow eschewed any identification of her work with Marxism, and was reluctant to use the term proletariat to describe her characters, *The Dollmaker* nonetheless offers a searing critique of American capitalism, and the decline of working class consciousness, during the 1940s and 1950s. However, given the historical context in which Arnow was writing, it is quite understandable that she would be reluctant to be associated with the prevailing understanding of the proletarian literary tradition and Marxism. The dominant literary paradigm of the 1950s, through the influences of the New York intellectuals and the hegemonic ideology of liberal consensus, presented the proletarian literary movement as dogmatic and anachronistic. For Arnow to have talked about working class characters, or claim a strong affinity with the proletarian novel, would therefore have aligned her, in popular consciousness, and possibly even in her own mind, with a radical but outmoded Marxist literary tradition. Reading *The Dollmaker* from a class perspective beyond the polarised politics of the Cold War, and drawing upon

more heterogeneous theoretical perspectives, reveals a political unconscious in the novel that offers a critique of mid-century American capitalism, and repositions *The Dollmaker* as a major American novel.

### **Southern Migration and Whiteness**

As southern working class whites, the Nevels' migration to Detroit entails a loss of cultural legitimacy which is compounded by the need to compete with the indigenous workforce and other recent migrants over scarce economic resources. The tensions and antagonisms between the neighbours in the Merry Hill project highlights the way in which the cultural politics of racial and ethnic difference during the migrations to the industrial centres during the 1940s were played out around an ideological construct of whiteness.

Despite the mass migration of Southern workers to the North during the twentieth century, which reached a peak during the 1940s, it has remained a relatively neglected area of study. This migration has been described by James Gregory as the “bottom-up process of Southernization” (135). He notes that, “Throughout the half century before the South redefined itself as sunbelt, the region had been feeding its sons and daughters into the cities and factories of the North and West”. Gregory's study shows that the numbers involved in this migration were substantial, “at least 11,000,000 ... in the decades between 1910 and 1970”, and that “approximately one-third of those departing Southerners were blacks; two thirds were white (136). However, he adds that “historians have closely examined [only] one half of that process: the African American exodus that remade the cities and politics of the North and ultimately forced a civil rights revolution

on the nation” (136). This migration did of course have a more crucial, and immediate, impact on national discourses than the white migration, and, particularly through the work of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, established this journey as an archetype in African American literature. However, the immediate effects of the white migration were, in contrast, relatively unclear, and the implications of this migration have taken time to become apparent. The consensus over the disappearance of class in the post-war years obscured the longer-term impact of the mass migrations in mid-century on the reformation of working class identity.

Remarking on the fictional and cultural narratives of these exoduses from the South, especially Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Dollmaker*, Gregory argues that the story of a “proud but backward rural people contending with extreme poverty” has imaginatively pervaded cultural and sociological studies of all these migrations. However, as he points out, “economic stability came fairly quickly to most migrants” and a “case can be made that the northernization of Southern whites was matched by the southernization of northern blue-collar culture” (137). Gregory and other historians have shown how white Southern politics, culture and beliefs interacted with the Northern working class, and how hostility between the groups produced a dramatic change in the Northern working class cultural demographic. Gregory notes:

The massive farm exodus that climaxed in the 1940s and 1950s brought millions of native-born Protestants into the blue-collar work place. Surveys suggest that by the 1960s the American working class had ceased to be primarily Catholic [and] by the end of the 1960s a careful eye could pick out important changes in

the styles and outlooks of major sectors of the white working class, changes that had southern origins. (136)

However, these changes failed to produce any coherent sense of collective working class identity. In fact, as *The Dollmaker* suggests, competition over scarce economic resources would be played out within the cultural sphere, revolving around contesting claims over the establishment of an 'authentic' identity, specifically over the issue of patriotism. As both the Southern Protestants and Northern Catholics have historically utilised the notion of whiteness as a means of establishing themselves in the hierarchy of working class identity, their co-existence in Detroit reveals the contradictory ideology of whiteness and offers a dramatic insight into how it has served to inhibit the development of working class consciousness.

David Roediger has explored the significance of the idea of whiteness in the development of the American working class. Roediger identifies how the construction of whiteness allowed working class Americans to ameliorate their position as wage slaves in as much as they were able to measure themselves by identifying themselves against the inferior status of African Americans:

the white working class, disciplined and made anxious by fear of dependency, began during its formation to construct an image of the Black population as 'other' – as embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for. (14)

However, this construction of a white identity not only divided working class identity on racial lines, but also failed to materialise into a cohesive white working class identity.

Whiteness, as an identity that achieves its primary legitimacy from an external

differentiation, is unstable and its authority always precarious. As Roediger's study shows, the result of this was the development of a hierarchy of ethnic and regional groups competing over their right to be 'white'. While the social and economic benefits of occupying a higher status in this hierarchy were relatively marginal, they were substantial enough to contribute to a weakening of class-consciousness.

As the norm of whiteness is created in opposition to an imagined disreputable, lazy, and feckless other, it is configured into a positive identification with individualism and freedom. Moreover, as this identification with whiteness is predicated upon the creation of a 'foreign' other, the imperative to occupy the hegemonic norm also contributes to the attachment of whiteness to national identity. As Stanley Aronowitz has pointed out, "working class nationalism is an outgrowth of powerlessness" (64). A strong identification of whiteness with such values as civic pride and citizenship would have important effects on the development of working class identity during World War II. The war, as Melvyn Dubofsky argues, "resolved the contradictions in American capitalism and substituted patriotic unity for class conflict" (138).

These competing claims over whiteness and patriotism contribute to the tensions in the Detroit housing project in *The Dollmaker*. The creation of a hegemonic white identity predicated on the African American other is entrenched in Detroit before the Nevels arrive. One of the first things they hear about the project is Mrs. Daly's daughter Maggie explaining to Gertie that, "These houses, they're good an warm anu rent's cheap, an they're the only places in Detroit where they keep u niggers out, really keep um out – sagainsa law" (80). The novel demonstrates how the mass influx of Southern whites into Detroit undermined the security of this white identity. The majority of workers in the

North are relatively recent immigrants from Europe, and suddenly they feel a threat to the whiteness they had constructed. This results in the Nevells' and other immigrants becoming subjected to abuse: throughout the novel, they are called "hillbilly", "Jew", "Jew-loven", "communist", and "nigger-loven". On a superficial level, the connections between these terms make no sense whatsoever, but where they do cohere is in a defensive affirmation of a white identity through the identification of an 'other' that is predicated on foreignness. The threat to Northern workers, especially to Catholics, from Southern Protestants, is compounded by the fierce competition for jobs and limited resources. In this struggle the ownership of whiteness becomes paramount.

It is through Mrs Miller, who is from the South, that Arnow dramatises the fragile nature of working class identity in Detroit. Mrs Miller, on the receiving end of one of Mr Daly's outbursts – "Detroit was a good town till da hillbillies come ... An den Detroit went to hell" (313) – retaliates:

'Want us to go back home an raise another crop a youngens at no cost to you an Detroit, so's they'll be all ready to save you when you start another war – huh? We been comen up here to save Detroit ever since th War a 1812.' She stood, hands on hips and looked at him, a proud defiant woman – and strong. She hadn't missed a day from sickness in all her three years of factory work. 'I almost wish I was stayen. I'd help make Detroit into a honest-to-God American town stid uv a place run by Catholic foreigners'. (509)

Although this is an attempt to mark out the differences between herself and the Dalys, Mrs. Miller's response utilises precisely the same terminology as the Dalys' attacks on Southerners, such as Mrs. Daly's abuse towards the Gospel woman: "I'm a good

patriotic Christian American. See? No nigger-loven, Jew-loven, communist's gonna stand on mu steps and tell me wot I gotta do. Don't think I don't know th likes a youse, communists, not saluten du flag'" (223). What is at stake in both attacks is a need to assuage their precarious economic circumstances through appeals to a cultural and social legitimacy, expressed through patriotism and hard work. The failure of these shared values to produce any cohesive collective identity in the housing project draws attention to the way in which the ideology of nationhood challenges class identity by drawing attention away from, and exploiting, economic alienation.

It is through Gertie, who rarely responds to these attacks, that Arnow reveals the affinities between the Southern migrants and the Northerners, and the potential for a shared class consciousness. Very early on, Gertie explains to Mrs. Daly's daughter Maggie that the face of the Virgin Mary would look something like her mother, explaining that:

‘They both seen a lot of trouble, had a heap a youngens, and worked hard’.... The most she'd seen of Maggie's mother was angry eyes above a broom handle, but she did work hard and keep her children clean. (262)

Equally, there are many moments when Mrs. Daly shows a care and concern for the very people she and her husband verbally abuse, being supportive and caring toward Gertie in times of trouble (272). This shared identity, based on a recognition of economic hardship, the importance of hard work, the need to care for the family and neighbours, and the desire for security, are the working class values in which ideally they might be able to find common ground.

But this common ground is recognised only fleetingly and the characters quickly resume their arguments. As *The Dollmaker* shows, in times of economic crisis such as the massive lay-offs at the end of World War II, these religious, racial, and ethnic differences and antagonisms quickly re-emerge, thereby undermining collective class identity at the very moment that this consciousness is most imperative. Inarticulate and overwhelmed by the necessities of survival, the characters in the project are unable to sustain any common discourse, and are constantly forced back into economic, cultural and social competition. The central hegemonic ‘norm’ against which these ‘others’ are positioned is a whiteness that is itself never fully present or wholly secure; each white identity has a number of distinguishing features, such as religion, ethnicity, region, and economic and social status, each potentially compromising the attainment of an ‘authentic’ identity. This instability produces a fear of everybody, which effectively translates into a fear of the self, as if at any moment each self is somehow potentially the other. This fear in *The Dollmaker* illustrates how the paranoia of the Cold War had deeper roots in the social and cultural structures of the mid 1940s, and was, as we will see in the next section, provoked and sustained on the economic level by the development of consumer credit and a commodity culture.

### **Consumer Credit and Commodity Culture**

Arnold has argued that she regards the circular economic logic of “production dependent on consumption”, which developed through World War II and which was foundational in the expansion of the post-war economy, as the “real demon” in *The Dollmaker* (Parker 212). One of Gertie’s first shocks in Detroit is to be reprimanded by



Clovis after she praises him for setting the home up nicely: “He looked at her with a great showing of surprise. ‘Law, woman, you shorely don’t think I’ve paid fer all this. Up here everybody buys everthing on time’” (187). In Detroit, Gertie’s previous skills of providing for her family through labour – growing and selling food – are ineffectual, and her new role, as housewife, necessitates a negotiation of consumer credit, with important implications for her class and gender identity.

Gertie’s reluctant education in living with credit and debt, and the way this interacts with her new domestic identity, reflects a larger transformation of the working class in the mid twentieth century. Lloyd Klein, in his study of American consumer credit, observes that, “Receipt of an initial credit account is essentially a form of formal economic status recognition” (1). He traces the history of consumer credit, and particularly how credit use accelerated through the 1940s and 1950s presenting a challenge to working class identity through an appeal to the possibility of a middle class lifestyle. For Klein, the “utilization of consumer credit since World War II has been accompanied by increased economic control associated with substantial cultural impact on American life” (8). One of the primary means by which this control is carried out, which provides much of the narrative tension between Gertie and Clovis in *The Dollmaker*, is Gertie’s awareness of her decreased status as a woman. This realisation highlights the ideological division between the sphere of paid work, which is primarily masculine, and the unpaid feminine sphere of the home. Clovis is able to adapt extremely quickly to both the environment of the industrial North and the world of credit, as responsibility for the economics of credit and the home is delegated to Gertie, but importantly only under Clovis’ supervision. As Parker observes, *The Dollmaker*

illustrates the fact that “living in Detroit means that production is removed from the home, and the consumption of commodities takes its place. Those who do not profitably produce commodities are devalued” (211).

It is this fear of being devalued, both by Clovis and in the eyes of her neighbours, and her responsibility to see that her family fits in, that drives Gertie, like most of her neighbours, to acquiesce to the system of credit and consumerism. The way in which the women of Merry Hill participate in the purchase of consumer goods and household devices on credit has intimations of the political economy of the patriarchal post-war nuclear family. To purchase was not only a perceived assertion of self-identity, but was an imperative that became assimilated to, and was perpetuated by, the patriotic ideology, first of World War II and then of the Cold War. This point is made very clearly when Mrs Anderson replies to Max’s comment that most of the domestic goods that people buy are “crap” and will break down before they are paid off:

‘Now, Max’ ... ‘you’re un-American – or else you don’t listen to the radio. Every woman dreams of a ten-cubic foot Icy Heart in her kitchen – Icy Heart power – Icy Heart. We must hurry up and win the war so we can all go out and buy Icy Hearts’. (281)

Like the other women in the neighbourhood, Gertie’s new role in Detroit is to manage the household economy under the direction of her husband, and this is a system that will be inculcated in the next generation. As Kathleen Walsh notes of the family dynamics in *The Dollmaker*, “even the children become willing adherents of a system which requires that these bewildered newcomers spend more than they have on shoddy goods they do not need” (95). Gertie’s bitter condemnation of credit is ineffectual, and will not be

passed down to her children; Clytie and Enoch frequently take their mother to task for her incompetence in managing the home, and they themselves are much more at ease in asking for credit. In this respect, as the new generation, they prefigure the way that credit and the patriarchal family structure will become increasingly entwined after the war. Moreover, due to the economic circumstances brought on by the strike, even Gertie is forced to become sophisticated in playing off various creditors against one another, admitting that, “Maybe it would be better to do as Sophronie did; buy stuff on credit from different people” (548).

Gertie’s ultimate absorption into this system is symbolically completed by her attitude to the money handed to her by Mrs Anderson to buy wood for the dolls which she is going to make for her, at the close of the novel. Mrs Anderson holds out “the slip of paper and three bills, clean and crisp with the pretty, useless look of new money” (590). The “useless look of new money” has important implications for understanding the role of money and credit as it develops throughout the novel. Gertie’s perception here is in stark contrast to her treatment and understanding of money earlier on. Back in Kentucky, Gertie saves money by stuffing “worn and grimy” bills into her coat, and when she adds the new bills, received from the officer who takes her and Amos to the hospital in chapter two, they are “crumpled hastily into tiny balls” (41). The saving of these worn bills in her coat emphasises Gertie’s suspicion of banks and finance, but her habit of scrunching up new bills so that they match the old ones suggests a deeper attachment. This becomes clearer when she is alone in the hospital room and begins to count out her money:

Each she unfolded and smoothed flat on the floor with the palm of her hand, looking at it an instant with first a searching, then a remembering glance. Sometimes after a moment of puzzlement she whispered, ‘that was eggs at Samuel’s two years ago last July,’ and to a five, ‘that was th walnut-kernel money winter before last,’ and to another one, ‘that was th big dominecker that wouldn’t lay atall’. (41)

For Gertie, the money’s worn appearance represents an authenticity that derives from its physical relationship to the original transaction. Gertie’s understanding of money is based on an agrarian economy in which money functions as a supplement to the trading of goods and services, acting as a medium in a mutually agreed exchange. In these exchanges, it is the goods and services, and the agreement between the parties, which determines the value of the money, and this value is retained, for Gertie, in the physical bill. In shock at her inability in Detroit to negotiate household finances and to make ends meet, Gertie makes a more explicit statement about her understanding of economics and the way in which money, for her, represents a stable medium through which individual transactions occur. However, in Detroit, everything has changed:

It wasn’t the way it had used to be back home when she had done her share, maybe more than her share of feeding and fending for the family. Then with egg money, chicken money, a calf sold here, a pig sold there, she’d bought almost every bite of food they didn’t raise. Here everything, even to the kindling wood, came from Clovis. (338)

Gertie’s experience of a substance economy has been replaced by the nebulous world of credit and conspicuous consumption. Her shock at the “clean and crisp” dollar bills

handed to her by Mrs Anderson suggests that their smoothness has triggered a recognition of this new economic culture in which the value of money is determined not by its last transaction – the wages paid for Clovis’ labour – but by its *potential* purchasing power in the capitalist marketplace. However, Gertie is unable to articulate anything beyond this shock which draws attention to the patriarchal structure of the consumer economy, where she is utterly dependent on Clovis (or more precisely Clovis’ wages) for the family’s economic wellbeing, in contrast to the (albeit limited) agency she enjoyed in Kentucky.

Gary Cross points out that developments in the US economy in the 1940s reflected a conscious strategy by businesses that had important ideological implications:

American big business had learned how to overcome its Depression-era image as heartless and irresponsible by associating itself with its products rather than its factories. The promise of the postwar era was a resurrection of the consumerist message from the 1920s – an image of seamless harmony, the blending of old and new, the spiritual and material, the private and public. To consume was to be free. (86)

The increasing focus on consumerism had immediate effects and by 1946 “personal consumption was 20 percent higher than in 1945 and 70 percent higher than in 1941” (Cross 21). Moreover, the ideological message behind this increase in consumer spending, in terms of its promise of freedom, had a detrimental effect on working class identity. Consumerism, as Mrs Anderson’s new dollar bills suggests, signifies a value system that is based upon its potential value in the future. The identity promised by consumer goods is therefore perpetually deferred, producing a continued demand for

goods; and importantly for class identity it diverts attention away from shared labour experience and wage labour, and into the competitive sphere of consumption. *The Dollmaker* dramatises the early stages of Herbert Marcuse's "one dimensional" society, in which "people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split level home". In this society, "social control is anchored in the new needs which [the consumer society] has produced" (24). The lure of a socially recognised identity implicit in the promises offered through the consumption of goods appeals to an individualism that negates the radical challenges afforded by a collective working class identity, which in contrast recognises shared alienation. As Gary Cross argues, the encouragement of consumption became a "means of waging class war – but at a personal level and with a minimum of overt violence" (22).

In *The Dollmaker*, the constant debt faced by the residents of Merry Hill, and their jealousies over each other's consumer goods, illustrate how consumerism undermines collective class consciousness on a daily basis. But it is the Andersons who symbolise a more substantial challenge to working class identity that was underway by the 1940s. Homer, as a university educated manager, and Mrs Anderson, whose main responsibilities are to look after the children and attend social functions with Homer's bosses, epitomise the new white collar 'middle class'. Their obsession with appearances and correct social etiquette indicates that they have accepted what Klein points out are "the new consumer values accompanying new professional status" and the role of finance in providing "the cultural signs of success in the broadened economic system" (Klein 25). Their identification with a middle class social and cultural lifestyle distances them in their own minds from the other residents, and when they move to a new house in the

suburbs it appears that they have enacted a complete break with the working class. However, near the end of the novel, when Mrs Anderson returns to the project, she has a conversation with Gertie in which she reveals the reality of their life. Utilising an image that resonates with the dollar bills she hands to Gertie, Mrs. Anderson describes her life in the suburbs as “smoother ... [with] no rough stuff”. Moreover, she has also started to effect a look that embodies her new middle class lifestyle, gently mocking Gertie for not saying “a word about the way I look – the skinned onion look”, which suggests an identity that has become absorbed into the commodified culture. As Mrs Anderson explains, “everything is like that, smooth, no smell” (586). However, this lifestyle is purely superficial and has no secure economic foundation. In a rare moment of honesty, Mrs Anderson reveals that they are financially poorer than they were in Merry Hill, admitting to Gertie that, “the real art is living so as to fool the neighbors, easily, smoothly, and never drop a hint to anyone that we’ve gone in so deeply we have to spend the salary before we get it” (587).

The Andersons’ middle class lifestyle, determined by consumption and the maintenance of appearances, is one that emerges in the 1950s as a major ideological challenge to working class identity. For instance, Daniel Boorstin, one of the leading Consensus historians in the 1950s, supported his claim that the United States was a classless society by stressing the shared identity attained through consumption. For Boorstin, “people have a feeling of shared well-being, shared risks, common interests and common concerns that come from consuming the same kind of objects” (21). However, as *The Dollmaker* suggests, the shared identity gained through consumption is an illusionary one. The ideology of individualism as attainable through the pursuit of

prosperity means that a stable identity is never attained, and as such, this necessitates a process of constant consumption and an increase in debt. Rather than creating a stable “feeling of shared well-being”, the consumer society that emerges in the 1940s and 1950s produces an atomised society in which fractional differences in income and lifestyle, such as those between Gertie and Mrs Anderson, obscure the social and economic experiences of a shared working class identity.

### **Working Class Values and the Politics of Conservatism**

Michael Denning points out that “Gertie is defeated by the world of Fordist capitalism” (468). It is her ineffectual attempts to resist this defeat that provide an insight into how capitalism is able to maintain its hegemony through the manipulation of working class values, which become antagonistic to the development of a critical working class consciousness. While Gertie’s resistance to the conditions in Detroit provides a critical perspective on capitalism, the difficulties in articulating any coherent working class political discourse in this environment means that her points of reference, particularly the conservative values of her Kentucky upbringing, are not just ineffectual in terms of resistance, but ultimately compliant with the dominant ideology of capitalism.

The fact that Gertie’s defeat is an ideological as well as an economic one is illustrated very early in the novel. When the officer who has stopped to help Gertie and Amos asks her what crops the farmers grow in the area, Gertie’s response displays a very clear and sophisticated understanding of working class identity and the dynamics of capitalism:



‘A little of everything’.

‘But what is their main crop?’ he insisted.

‘Youngens’, she said, holding the child’s hands that were continually wandering toward the hole in his neck. ‘Youngens fer th wars and them factories’. (24 - 25)

However, one of the major tragedies of the novel is that Gertie is unable to sustain this awareness, and, as the novel progresses, her criticisms fail to register this early political insight. While such a political awareness would have served Gertie well in Detroit, her lack of education, the absence of any shared class awareness through the competition over scarce resources, and the patriarchal family system, thwart Gertie’s ability to articulate any class identity. Like her neighbours in Merry Hill, Gertie’s attempts to negotiate the economic conditions in Detroit increasingly rely on utilising the underlying conservatism of her upbringing, particularly her religious education and an ambiguous understanding of the values of individual responsibility.

Religion has played an important part in Gertie’s upbringing, and her education has consisted almost entirely of reading the Bible. In this respect, she differs little from the Catholics she will encounter in Detroit. While Gertie’s interpretation of the Bible is less apocalyptic and severe than her mother’s Calvinism, it nonetheless retains a strong residual trace of her mother’s teaching. Haeja K. Chung takes issue with those critics who read Gertie as a strong woman, arguing that her religious commitment undermines her autonomy, particularly in the way that this belief perpetuates the patriarchal family unit, and that “Gertie is one of Arnow’s many hill women trapped by fundamentalist religious and patriarchal codes of conduct” (214). These patriarchal codes of conduct constantly thwart her attempts to be independent, and lead her away from a clear social

and political awareness, which results in her making decisions that have ambiguous political implications, and which contribute to her own tragedy. Only when she is on her own, at the beginning of the novel, is she able to act in an assertive manner, carrying out the roadside tracheotomy on Amos; significantly, this act takes place at the same time that she displays the most aggressive awareness of class politics in her response to the officer. Just as this class awareness subsequently dissipates, so does her ability to assert herself, and she quickly re-assumes her subordinate role with Clovis by refusing even to tell him that she carried out the tracheotomy. However, there are further intimations in the early part of the novel that Gertie does have the potential to transcend her subservient role as a female. With the majority of men away during the war, the other women rely on Gertie to carry out physical tasks for them, and she comments that “I reckon I’ll have to be the man in this settlement” (102). But this is only a temporary arrangement until the men return, and the need for the presence of a man, even when men are absent, demonstrates the ingrained nature of this patriarchal ideology within their language. More tragically, it is Gertie’s inability to stand up to her mother’s values, and her fear of Clovis, that mean that she is unable to buy the Tipton farm, and which lead her to follow Clovis to Detroit.

In Detroit, Gertie frequently relies upon her religious belief and on patriarchal values in order to cope with and make sense of the industrial city, and this produces an uncertain political awareness. While Gertie is extremely sympathetic to those who are suffering, as evidenced in her willingness to help any of her neighbours in Detroit, this compassion is directed by an ambiguous sense of responsibility. It is never quite clear if Gertie’s compassion is motivated by a religious sense of duty, or a recognition of the

socio-economic conditions and her social and political responsibilities within them. This ambiguity is clearly evident in her attitude to the poverty in Merry Hill, where, unable fully to comprehend the economic system, she falls back on to her mother's Calvinistic morality:

There couldn't be any poor people, not real poor, in Detroit when they were making men come out of the back hills to work in Detroit's factories .... Maybe it was like she'd heard her mother say when somebody pitied Meg; factory workers, coal miners, and such were a shiftless, spendthrift tribe. (198)

This interpretation regards poverty as the result of a lack of values and self-respect, rather than of low wages and insecure work contracts, and serves to ameliorate the individual's feeling of alienation and exploitation by providing an alternative understanding of individualism within a secure religious narrative. From a Protestant perspective, informed by the influence of New England Puritanism, poverty can be perceived as a test: 'Man' is fallen, so poverty is God's will, and while salvation cannot be guaranteed, there is a moral responsibility to accept poverty with dignity. Yet there is also the strand of Puritanism that sustains the principles of hard work and saving, so that economic failure or success is the result of personal choice and behaviour. However, the paradox in this, as *The Dollmaker* illustrates, is that everybody in the neighbourhood, both Protestant and Catholic, is utilising their religious beliefs in a similar way, to negotiate their economic identity, so that class identity becomes subordinate to a politically quiescent individualism that is constantly monitored through guilt. This religiously informed understanding of identity, part Divine Will and part work ethic, sustains the illusion of free will, but in a form contained within a secure ideological framework. In this respect,

it coheres with the post-war ideology of consensus, whereby supposedly autonomous 'middle class' individuals are able to exercise choice within the consensual body politic, which is able to mediate and manage any potential conflict. This shift, from the religious ideology of Gertie and Mrs. Daly to post-war consensus is evident in the world-view which they share with the Andersons. There is very little difference between the ideological structures of Gertie's and Mrs. Daly's religious beliefs, and the secular 'middle class' beliefs of the Andersons, where religious fealty is replaced by duty to the company, and 'God's will' is transposed on to the macro-economic structures of capitalism.

Gertie's belief in individualism and family also facilitates a reactionary conservative politics when these values are pitted against her experience of the unions. Again, Gertie's belief is influenced by her mother's antagonism towards them. Faced with Clovis' involvement in union violence, Gertie remembers her mother's opinion of unions back in the days of the labour struggles in Harlan: "Her mother had gone around sniffing, declaring that if a man didn't want to work and went on strike and left his children to starve he ought to be shot" (513). In Detroit however they both become more ambivalent about the unions, and show signs of an incipient class awareness. After the first strike, Clovis becomes actively involved in union politics and Gertie even begins to question her mother's beliefs:

She had agreed with her mother then ... but now? Suppose a man didn't want to strike after the vote was taken? Could he work? Or suppose the men in the mines hadn't struck, and one man alone stood up and said, 'I won't work because the pay's too low, the timbering's bad, and too many men have already died from bad

air and you won't fix the fans...'. To that one man or the dozen men or the hundred the company could have said, 'You're fired.' Then what?' (513 -14)

However, their tentative class awareness is not sustained, particularly after Clovis is physically attacked by a company paid thug. Gertie's reconsideration of her opinion is only fleeting, and she quickly reverts to her original belief, arguing with her neighbour Whit, a strong union supporter, that "'a body's got a right to be free. They oughtn't to have to belong tu nothen, not even a union'" (530). Clovis appears to be more obsessed with gaining revenge on his assailant than understanding the class politics behind the attack. Whit attempts to explain to Clovis and Gertie the complexity of the labour situation and that the attack on Clovis is part of a deliberate plan by the company to foster labour unrest in order to break the unions: "Somebody inu company hired these thugs; th war's over; they don't mind a little labor trouble ... they're out to bust the unions'" (530). Clovis' and Gertie's understandable failure to appreciate the larger picture, through their precarious economic situation and their limited education, manifests itself in a reassertion of their individualism. Clovis takes a violent pride in seeking revenge, and Gertie falls back on religious and family values – turning them against the unions and frustrating their incipient class awareness.

Through Whit's prediction that the unions will be challenged after the war, and the Nevels' response, the novel dramatises the early stages of the post-war attack on union power, most notably through the passing of Labor Management Act (better known as the Taft-Hartley Act) in 1947. The Act, which limited Communist Party affiliation, either real or suspected, for union members, played on a crucial ideological justification for curbing union power. Section 14b of the Act was based on the "right to work" which,

while ostensibly designed to limit secondary picketing, exploited workers' fears over the trade unions' denial of individual rights, very much echoing Gertie's own criticism of the unions. As George Lipsitz points out, the Act "inverted reality by assuming that coercive leaders compelled contented workers to strike" (171). This "inverted reality", with an emphasis on individual rights, combined with a patriotic anti-communism, is one that workers like Gertie and Clovis – forgetting the role of the unions in the 1930s and 1940s in legitimising workers' rights in the first place – would readily accept, particularly as economic conditions improved during the 1950s.

The appeal to individual rights over the 'authoritarian' unions in the 1950s was further enhanced by a number of exposés of union corruption, and there are intimations of this in *The Dollmaker*. Protestant workers from the South, like Clovis, constantly complain that the company and the union are run by Catholics:

'Not even Jesus Christ had to put up with a Catholic foreman on one side, a yellen for you to go faster, an a Catholic steward a tellen you they's no need to break your neck a repairin a machine, that a minute's rest won't kill the tender'. (253)

The fear of union corruption was a major concern in the 1950. This fear was popularly disseminated through Elia Kazan's film *On the Waterfront*, released in the same year as *The Dollmaker*, and Arnow's novel offers an important critical rejoinder to the conservative politics of Kazan's film. As many historians have pointed out, corruption in the unions was not as widespread as commonly believed, and at local levels unions were extremely effective. Nelson Lichtenstein even suggests that corruption was actually symptomatic of the post-war anti-union legislation:

the stolid quality of post-war unionism reflected the institutional constraints and legal structures under which the unions were forced to function. Ironically, it was the very decentralisation and fragmentation of the post-war bargaining system, the hostility of management, and the relative weakness and vulnerability of the labour movement that generated a huge stratum of full-time officials, put a premium on authoritarian leadership, devalued independent politics, and opened the door to a whole set of corruptions that became an integral part of the post-war union mythos. (142)

However, *On the Waterfront*, and Father Barry's role particularly, presents a perception of unionism that is predicated upon very specific ideological arguments that are apposite to the consensual politics of the 1950s; as Peter Biskind argues, "*On the Waterfront* presents nothing less than a pluralist paradigm for dealing with dissent" (170). The values propagated in the film, based around an ambiguous humanist individualism, have, as Biskind asserts, important implications for class identity in the post-war years:

The conflict in *On the Waterfront* is not between classes, not labor against management, but within the working class, labor against labor. When those on both sides of the barricades belong to the same class, no class issue can be at stake. And with class thrown overboard, the way is cleared for a priest (Father Barry), the government (the Crime Commission investigators), and a woman (Edie Doyle) to establish the terms that will define and circumscribe the drama: God, country, and family. (173)

In contrast, *The Dollmaker* offers a more critical and sophisticated understanding of post-war labour and class politics. The values implicit in *On the Waterfront*, based on a

belief in God (who can now appeal to working class Protestants *and* Catholics), national identity, and in the sanctity of the nuclear family, are dramatised in *The Dollmaker* as capitalist strategies which deflect attention away from capitalism's own role in economic hardship, social and cultural insecurity, and alienation.

### **An Uncertain Resolution**

Throughout the novel Gertie is carving the figure of a man in a block of wood, and is unsure as to whether the face will be that of Judas or Christ. The ambiguous ending of the novel, in which her final act is to destroy the carving before the head is complete in order to use the wood to make dolls for sale, has encouraged debate over whether Gertie betrays her art, or sacrifices it for her family. However, these readings engage with a dichotomy that fails to register the larger social and class context of Gertie's agency. Beth Harrison, for example, identifies *The Dollmaker* as a "female pastoral" which "envisions new class relationships and stresses not individual but cooperative action", and argues that that the novel offers a critique of capitalism in showing how, "despite the cooperation among the women in the housing project, communal values are ultimately ineffective in a capitalistic world which favours bitter rivalry over compassion" (94). However, Harrison also reads Gertie's sacrifice of her carving from a feminist perspective as a positive act, in which "she has asserted her autonomy and her ability to provide for the welfare of others when her husband cannot" (97). The difficulty presented here is in reconciling Gertie's assertion of her autonomy as a woman with the failure of class co-operation, which leaves Gertie's act at best futile, and at worst, complicit with the individualistic values of capitalism. Haeja K. Chung



takes issue with the critical focus on this dichotomy, and offers a much clearer interpretation of the ending, arguing that Gertie is unable to transcend the patriarchal and religious system inherited from her mother, and that she is neither “the misunderstood female victim”, nor the “heroic character that some feminist interpretations offer” (217). It is Gertie’s *obsession with* this opposition that marks the limits of her thinking, and her inability to think beyond it that contributes to the tragedy of the novel. Ultimately, Gertie has no choice as to whether she is, or will be, represented by a Judas or Christ figure. In her acquiescence to the patriarchal system inherited from her mother, she only acts when Clovis allows her to, and her reliance on a questionable understanding of individual freedom restricts her ability to fully realise her class identity.

Readings that interpret the ending as offering some form of resolution to Gertie’s internal search for autonomy and self-identity stem from a failure to grasp the larger class context of the novel. These readings are symptomatic of a tendency in American literary criticism to assume that American individualism is historically unique and is sufficient in itself to offer a realisation of full identity. Kathleen Walsh, for example, praises *The Dollmaker* for “its imposing and original treatment of a recurring American theme, the necessity of assuming individual freedom and responsibility” (91). However, this argument is deeply problematic when considering how “freedom” and “responsibility” function in *The Dollmaker* when located in the historical context of the 1940s and 1950s, and the ways in which these values legitimised post-war capitalism and contributed to the fragmentation of working class identity. Individualism and responsibility were key ideological terms behind anti-communism and anti-union labour laws; they were used in support of the sanctity of the nuclear family, and they enforced the dual imperatives

behind mass consumption: to consume was both a mark of individual expression and a patriotic responsibility to protect the economy. In fact, American individualism is grounded in familiar Western humanist assumptions that fail to offer any solution to economic and social inequality and individual alienation. The illusory promise to the contrary only serves to perpetuate capitalism and inequality.

The means by which the values of individual freedom and responsibility, which in theory are capable of fostering strong class allegiances, were appropriated by the hegemonic post-war ideology of consensus can be read as an example of Althusser's theory of ideology, in which ideology is a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence" (18). The over-determination of these values, in the hegemonic Cold War context of democracy and nationalism, meant that working class individuals became interpellated into a discourse which provided an impression of working class solidarity but was actually configured within a capitalist system that is, in fact, antipathetic to any class identity.

*The Dollmaker* is not a politically didactic novel, and in the context of the 1950s it is possible to see why many liberal critics, inculcated with the belief that working class novels were characterised by a heavy-handed politics and depictions of 'cartoon' workers, would fail to notice *The Dollmaker's* class politics. Arnould's own literary preferences were for writers such as Dickens and Thomas Hardy (Eckley 123), and *The Dollmaker*, in terms of literary form, has strong affinities with the nineteenth century realist novel. In this respect, it invites a reading through Georg Lukacs' analysis of the realist novel, in *History and Class Consciousness*, in which he identifies the desire to create an "intensive totality" which corresponds to the "extensive totality", and which

produces those discontinuities in the narrative – between the order of the form of the novel and the complexities of lived experience – within which the hegemonic ideology of the historical moment is exposed.

Paradoxically, it was a handful of humanist critics, such as William Eckley, who in the post-war years saved *The Dollmaker* from disappearing altogether. But the assumptions behind many of these readings have perpetuated an understanding of the novel in which it is viewed through the very values that it critiques. The failure of the left to challenge American capitalism, and the continued presence of massive economic inequality in the United States, underlines the importance of such novels as *The Dollmaker*. New critical work on class, and re-assessments of twentieth century working class cultural history, such as the work of Michael Denning and Alan Wald, now offer possibilities for a major re-assessment of Arnow's novel and the way it engages with a key moment in the redevelopment of twentieth century American capitalism and its effects on working class identity.

## Chapter Five

### Race, Class and Literary Form in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

Chester Himes' career is generally considered to be divided between the 'serious' political novels of the 1940s, and the commercially successful crime fiction he wrote after he moved to Europe in 1953. The mixed critical reception of the early novels, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), *Lonely Crusade* (1947) and *Cast the First Stone* (1952), combined with a hostile racist publishing industry, were the main contributing factors behind Himes' decision to move to France. *Lonely Crusade*, in particular, was denounced by every conceivable political grouping, from the Communist Party, to the African American press, to Jewish critics to conservatives. In contrast, his crime novels, referred to as his 'Harlem Domestic' novels, featuring the Harlem detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, achieved instant commercial and critical success in Europe. Despite this, these novels were slow to reach the United States, and when they did they were either ignored or treated with a degree of condescension. In 1958, Himes' first 'crime' novel, *La Raine des Pommes*, which was translated into French and published by Marcel Duhamel, the editor of Gallimard's La Série Noire series, was awarded the prestigious *Grand prix de la littérature policière*, with Himes becoming the first non-French speaking writer to get the award. However, as James Sallis points out, the version published in the U.S. as *For Love of Imabelle* was "so severely cut and scrambled that he thought it all but unrecognizable" (279). It was eventually published in full in 1965 as *A Rage in Harlem*, but even then the success of his crime novels was more commercial than critical. As Charles Silet argues, the reviews of these novels "with few

exceptions remained slight” and this was “in part ... due to the fact that critics were reviewing what they thought of as ‘crime’ fiction, at best a bastard genre, and certainly not ‘literary’” (xx). Although Himes has recently attracted more critical attention, particularly from scholars exploring the continuities between his earlier novels and his crime fiction, he remains, in most critical assessments, a relatively peripheral writer.

As an African American writer, Himes faced the difficulty of negotiating his identity within a literary culture that perceived it in narrow terms. Himes’ 1940s novels, *If He Hollers* and *Lonely Crusade*, were published mid-way between the two most famous mid-century African American novels, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in 1940 and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* in 1952. Whereas Himes’ novels were regarded negatively as a continuation, or revisiting, of Wright’s naturalist protest novel, *Invisible Man* was considered much more in keeping with the prevailing intellectual consensus of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in its foregrounding of modernist formal techniques and existential ideas, which were viewed as an ‘advance’ for the African American novel. Himes’ marginalisation within this perceived transition from Wright to Ellison draws attention to the difficulties faced by African American writers during this period. Although race relations were a dominant feature of American politics, as a subject for literature race was regarded as a single issue, too limited to warrant any comprehensive attention. Accordingly, very few African American writers were critically acknowledged. As Loyle Hairston points out in an essay on Himes in 1977, “one at a time was the rule of the liberal game” (22). To achieve recognition they frequently had to compete against one other, which involved, as in the case of Himes and Ellison, not only displacing the previously acclaimed writer (Richard Wright), but also demonstrating some form of

progression or enhancement which would dovetail with the new liberal hegemonic culture.

The battles and debates over Wright's 'heir' in the 1940s and 1950s constantly frustrated Himes, as his fiction was either overlooked or treated with caution as essentially a repetition of Wright. As he wrote in his autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*, "the powers that be have never admitted but one black at a time into the arena of fame, and to gain this coveted admission, the young writer must unseat the reigning deity" (201). Himes' concern was that opportunities for writers like himself were circumscribed by a white middle class culture that regarded African American writers through the narrowly defined theme of protest. Consequently, discourse on the African American novel became organised around the question of the most effective form of protest, and of how such protest was consistent with prevailing literary standards. As will be discussed below, the fierce debates over the African American protest novel initiated by James Baldwin's essay in *Partisan Review* in 1949, "Everybody's Protest Novel", and his follow up in 1951 "Many Thousands Gone", were as much a symptom of the limited opportunities for African American writers as they were about what constituted the most effective means of writing about race.

### **Critical Context of the Post-war African American Novel**

Wright's *Native Son* had such a major cultural and political impact on American society, and Bigger Thomas became such an iconic character, that it was always going to be difficult for African American writers to follow. However, while Wright's novel was successful in bringing the issue of race to critical attention, its bleak naturalism, and its

tendency to waver between nihilism and Marxism, marks out certain limits in terms of where 'pure' naturalistic protest could go. The 1940s saw a dramatic shift in race relations, particularly through the demands of the war economy which opened up jobs for African Americans and other minorities. While these opportunities were fraught with overt and covert racism, this participation increased the sense of entitlement to equality. In the euphoria of victory and the development of a strong post-war American identity, the role of African Americans in the war effort generated a search for an identity that moved beyond protest and became a debate over something more comprehensive. In literature, this initiated the development of more complex themes and forms to (re)incorporate African American identity within the broader American identity. As James Baldwin pointed out in his review of Himes' *Lonely Crusade*:

The minstrel man is gone and Uncle Tom is no longer to be trusted. Even Bigger Thomas is becoming irrelevant; we are faced with a black man as many faceted as ourselves are, as individual, with our ambivalences and insecurities and our struggles to be loved. He is now an American and we cannot change that; it is our attitudes which must change both towards ourselves and him. ("History as Nightmare" 11)

However, this need for more complex treatments of African American experience ran counter to the developing liberal consensus that saw a clear distinction between the realism of the 1930s and the new 'moral' realism of the 1940s and 1950s favoured by the liberal intellectuals. The contrasting fortunes of Himes and Ellison highlight the paradoxical and confusing situation for African American writers during the 1940s and 1950s. *If He Hollers* and *Invisible Man* are very similar novels in many respects, as they

are both concerned with African American identity and engage with the concept of realism as it pertains to the ‘reality’ of this identity. They portray complex individuals, offer criticisms of the Communist Party and display a cynicism towards the trade unions. Yet the two are seen as opposed to each other – one looking backwards towards the protest of the 1930s and the other moving towards the existential realism of the 1950s. As they came up against the developing liberal consensus, their differences, however slight, became fundamental. Exaggerated stress fell on two aspects: that Ellison’s novel foregrounds its modernist aspects much more than Himes’, and that while *Invisible Man* grapples with existential issues, *If He Hollers* is much more explicit about class and economics.

The reification of realism, protest and class as a 1930s ‘product’, had clear implications for how the African American novel ‘should’ be developing. This ‘movement’ – from the naturalism and ‘protest’ of *Native Son* to the more existential and philosophical *Invisible Man* – which parallels the dominant narrative of the liberal intellectuals, is evident in Malcolm Bradbury’s treatment of these works in his study, *The Modern American Novel*. For Bradbury “the naturalist credentials of [*Native Son*] are clear”, whereas *Invisible Man*, “while a novel of liberal sympathies ... is also a novel about the disappearance of self and the collapse of the moral perspective” (129). Furthermore, as if to confirm its inevitability, Bradbury sees this development already suggesting itself tentatively in Wright’s novel. Bigger Thomas, for Bradbury, is “not so much the sacrificial victim as the figure of the modern identityless man. He is a man without essence .... He is the outsider” and “he finally identifies himself as one of ‘suffering humanity’” (104). While this interpretation does prefigure Wright’s later



writings – most obviously *The Outsider* (1953) – it retrospectively imposes a narrative based on what the white liberal establishment would deem to be the important literary movements of the mid century. The fact remains that Wright did not *necessarily* have to develop that way, and there is an argument, which was taken up by many other African American writers of the time, including Himes, that Wright's move in this direction came about precisely *because* of his desire for critical success, and was affected by his disengagement from the United States following his move to France.

This polarisation of literary form which positioned Himes between Wright and Ellison, not only ignores the affinities between them but obscures the fact that many African American writers were developing in different directions from Wright, and that Ellison was not necessarily representative of all African American writing. This problem is compounded by the prevailing idea of the African American novel being concerned with a single protest issue – race – and therefore of limited value in the broader literary culture. Again, Bradbury's study is instructive in illustrating the limited presence of African American writers in general surveys of the 1940s and 1950s. In his chapter on these decades, Bradbury asserts that “the Black writers like Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, [were] portraying the Black less as social victim than a figure of modern invisibility” (133). He thereby limits his study to the three usual suspects and highlights their commonality – at least in the way in which they were interpreted – with the prevailing literary standards.

This categorisation ignores the large number of African American writers in the 1940s and 1950s who did not appear to conform either to the Wright school of ‘protest’ or to Ellison's ‘invisibility’ and ‘anxiety’. As well as Himes there is a long list of African

American writers from this period who receive, at best, marginal critical attention: Willard Motley, Ann Petry, Lloyd Brown, John Oliver Killens, Lorraine Hansberry, Margaret Walker, Arna Bontemps, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, William Attaway, Frank Yerby, Dorothy West, William Gardner Smith, William Denby, Frank Marshall Davis, John A. Williams, Owen Dodson, and J. Saunders Redding. Like Himes, many of these writers were attentive to the important tradition of 1930s realism and naturalism, but were equally concerned with developing the novel in subtle and complex ways, incorporating a wide variety of forms and styles, while aware of the class politics of the politics of race. However, their failure to *fully* embrace the prevailing consensus, combined with the critical belief that the African American novel was concerned with a single issue to the exclusion of other issues, meant that these writers were frequently ignored.

However, the distinction between (the historical) Wright and (the contemporary) Ellison did not altogether assist Ellison either. His position as *the* representative writer, and his 'adoption' by the white liberal literary critics, exacerbated the tensions within the African American literary community, who particularly took exception to Ellison's modernist credentials. Lloyd Brown, reviewing *Invisible Man* in 1952, criticises Ellison's stated preference for modernism and for his European influences. He finds that the novel lacks an understanding of the full range of African American political and class experiences, and he mocks Ellison's "one-man against-the-world theme" (63). Brown recalls an interview Ellison gave to the *Saturday Review* in which Ellison revealed the strong influence of T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" on his life and work. In this interview, Ellison acknowledges that, "Eliot said something to my sensibilities that I couldn't find

in Negro poets who wrote of experiences I myself had gone through” (Brown 64). For Brown this helps to “establish the fact that [Ellison’s] work is alien to the Negro people and has its source in upper-class corruption”; he can see “nothing in common between the wailing eunuchs of decay on the one hand, and the passionate strength and beauty of Negro poetry on the other” (64). Brown can only speculate “as to what it was in Ellison’s ‘sensibilities’ that drew him to Eliot and away from his people and away from all people” (64). However, this criticism of Ellison stems from the specific climate of the 1940s and 1950s, and is illustrative of the way in which African American writers became embroiled in critical debates among themselves, the parameters of which were determined by white liberal critics.

Malcolm Bradbury’s attention to the theme of “modern invisibility” in *Invisible Man* (133) and Morris Dickstein’s description of *If He Hollers* in *Leopards in the Temple* as a “pulpy protest” novel (55) obscure the ways in which social protest and modernist themes of invisibility are present in both novels. The incorporation of *Invisible Man* into the liberal critical paradigm is evident in Saul Bellow’s 1952 review of the novel, “Man Underground”. For Bellow:

Negro Harlem is at once primitive and sophisticated; it exhibits the extremes of instinct and civilization as few other American communities do. If a writer dwells on the peculiarity of this, he ends with an exotic effect. And Mr Ellison is not exotic. For him the balance of instinct and culture and civilization is not a Harlem matter; it is the matter, German, French, Russian, American, universal, a matter very little understood .... In our society Man Himself is idolized and publicly worshipped, but the single individual must hide himself underground and try to

save his desires, his thoughts, his soul, his invisibility. He must return to himself, learning self-acceptance and rejecting all that threatens to deprive him of his manhood. (609)

Bellow's reading is informed by the liberal preoccupation with the theme of the tension between the individual and the universal and, as such diminishes the importance of the particularities of African American experience in *Invisible Man*. Like Ellison, James Baldwin was also favoured by the liberal elite, with his early work in the late 1940s and early 1950s published by *Partisan Review* (which published his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel"), *New Leader* and *Commentary*. As Harvey Teres argues, such support for Baldwin suggests "mitigating circumstance" when assessing the New York intellectuals in their treatment of race. However, he questions why they should be so interested in Baldwin and points out that "the answer, it would seem is ... Baldwin's interest in modernism"; and these modernist credentials, he adds, were enhanced by Baldwin's attacks on the naturalism of Wright (173). The liberal critics' attraction to the work of Ellison and Baldwin was clearly influenced much more by the thematic and formal demands of their own ideas than by any understanding of the complex history of African American fiction and experience.

This appropriation of certain writers, while diminishing the racial importance of those writers who were favoured, created a detrimental cleavage in African American writing. Those writers, like Himes, who *appeared* to lack the necessary (modernist) formal or (existential) thematic qualities, were cast in terms of the opposite: as naturalist 'protest' writers with a singular interest in race. In this respect, there is a striking irony to the critical marginalisation of Himes. As Angus Calder argues, Himes was a victim of

the “the white predilection for casting black novelists as ‘race’ writers and then turning round to complain that they’re nothing more” (111). Himes’ neglect, and the appropriation of Ellison by the liberal elite, reflects precisely the “invisibility” that Ellison addresses: the inclination for whites to cast African Americans in formulaic stereotypes.

### **Himes and ‘Protest’**

Himes was constantly irritated by the critical attention to his opinions on race which ignored his abilities as a creative writer. After a review of *If He Hollers*, which failed to comment on its literary merit, Himes wrote an acerbic and sarcastic response the following week in the *Saturday Review of Literature* entitled “The Author Talks Back” in which he attacked the narrow interpretation of his novel:

And to those who complained that I had offered no solution for the problem my book presented, I wrote that I belonged to a nation which, coming from a severe depression, had its fleet sunk at Pearl Harbour and had been caught in a war totally unprepared, without army or weaponry, but which had mustered its will and its energy and its ability and in five short years had amassed the greatest navy and the greatest Army in the history of the world and had learned to split the atom as a weapon more powerful than could be conceived by the average intelligence, and to ask me, an incidental black writer with a limited education and no status whatsoever, to solve its internal racial problem, was preposterous. (*Quality of Hurt* 77)

Critics who did notice Himes, and appreciated his work, understood that he was first of all a creative writer, and that his protest emerged *through* his fiction rather than his fiction being directed, in some predetermined naturalistic manner, by his desire to offer a solution to the 'race problem'. Shane Stevens, for instance, writing in the *Washington Post Book World* in 1969, asserts that Himes has "carved out for himself an area of confrontation that is applicable – and meaningful – effective social protest and effective art" (4). For Stevens, Himes was one of the few African American writers who was able to resist the restricting paradigms established by the middle class liberal elite:

Among the others, there are James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, both of whom have adapted the pose of the disaffected liberal. Their middle-class, aesthetic viewpoint is readily apparent in their desire to be free of all limitations of race and national tradition. This is not to condemn, of course, but to suggest that this viewpoint does have its own built-in limitation: that of cutting oneself off from one's native experience. (5)

Stevens draws attention to the class politics that informed the liberal's critical reaction to Himes' work. Himes was keenly aware of the importance of class in the African American experience and the way in which the liberals' middle class political and artistic beliefs were far removed from the daily experiences of working class African Americans. Even though Himes was always a close friend of Richard Wright, he reacted to what he perceived as Wright's adoption of middle class values after Wright moved to France. As James Sallis points out, "Always a champion of Wright, Himes nonetheless found himself dismayed at [Wright's] middle-class behaviour: pretension, creature

comforts, self-satisfaction, and self-absorption” (189). But Himes’ most fierce criticism was directed towards the liberals, particularly for what he felt was their arrogant refusal to acknowledge the class ideologies of their own positions.

In 1948, Himes was invited to speak at the University of Chicago, in what would become a defining moment in his career. In his talk, entitled “The Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the United States”, Himes set out to explain the rationale behind some of the shocking and violent scenes in his fiction, explaining that this was the reality of African American working class experience – a reality that liberals refused to acknowledge:

If this plumbing for the truth reveals within the Negro personality, homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority, paradoxical anti-Semitism, arrogance, uncle-tomism, hate and fear of self hate, this then is the effect of oppression on the human personality. These are the daily horrors, the daily realities, the daily experiences of an oppressed minority. (Sallis 112)

The reaction, from an audience of black and white critics and intellectuals, was shocked silence. As Himes recalled, “When I finished reading that paper nobody moved, nobody applauded, nobody said anything else to me” (Fabre 73). This reaction severely affected Himes and further undermined his already fragile confidence following negative reviews of *Lonely Crusade*; as Fred Pfeil puts it, his response was to stay “drunk for the better part of the next five years” (723). While Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which engaged with exactly the same issues as Himes’ writing, but which openly expressed its modernist credentials, was interpreted through the ‘universal’ critical values of the liberal middle class, Himes presented a direct challenge to the liberal elite and their class assumptions. Their response was, as Himes would write later in *The Quality of Hurt*, a similar

embarrassed silence to the one from his Chicago audience: “Reactionaries hate the truth and the world’s rulers fear it; but it embarrasses the liberals, perhaps because they can’t do anything about it” (101). Himes’ failure to generate any critical discussion on the material, and contradictory, experiences of working class African Americans, and the negative critical attention to his own fictional attempts to engage with this, were the primary reasons behind Himes’ decision to move to France and to stop writing ‘serious’ fiction.

Himes’ career, like those of many African American writers, was detrimentally affected by a racist publishing industry that adhered to the same principles as the liberal intellectuals. His experience with the publication of *If He Hollers* was particularly frustrating and demeaning. Despite massive advance orders for the novel, and the publisher intimating that it could be a Book of the Month Club selection, friends were contacting Himes complaining that they couldn’t find the novel. As Himes explained to John A. Williams, the reason for this was that “there was one white woman editor whose name was never told me, who said that *If He Hollers* made her disgusted and it made her sick and nauseated”, and that this editor “had telephoned to their printing department in Garden City and ordered them to stop the printing. So they just arbitrarily stopped the printing of *If He Hollers* for a couple of weeks or so during the time when it would have been a solid best-seller” (37). When *Lonely Crusade* was published in 1947, Himes was due to give a number of book readings and radio interviews, yet his readings at Macy’s and at Bloomingdale’s, as well as a radio interview with Mary Margaret McBride, were cancelled at the last minute and without explanation. Even when Himes moved to France



and became an award-winning crime writer, he found it very difficult to find an American publisher.

These racist attitudes towards Himes' work were frequently dressed up in the argument that he was a mere protest writer, a tactic that Himes mocks in his 1955 novel *The Primitive*. In one scene, Himes depicts the central character Jesse Robinson, an aspiring writer, in a meeting with a publisher, Pope, who is about to reject Jesse's manuscript:

Pope's face resumed its customary expression of shame and guilt, like that of a man who's murdered his mother and thrown her body in the well, to be forever afterwards haunted by her sweet smiling face.

'I'm afraid I have bad news for you'.

Jesse looked at him, thinking, 'Whatever bad news you got for me – as if I didn't know – you're going to have to say it without me helping you. I'm one of those ungracious niggers'.

'Hobson thinks the public is fed up with protest novels. And I must say, on consideration, I agree with him'.

'What's protest about this book?' Jesse argued. 'If anything, it's tragedy. But no protest'.

'The consensus of the readers was that it's too sordid. It's pretty strong – almost vulgar, some of it'.

'Then what about Rabelais? The education of Gargantua? What's more vulgar than that?'

Pope blinked at him in disbelief. ‘But surely you realize that was satire? Rabelais was satirizing the humanist Renaissance – and certainly some of the best satire ever written ... This’ – tapping the manuscript neatly wrapped in brown paper on his desk – ‘is protest. It’s vivid enough, but it’s humourless. And there is too much bitterness and not enough just plain animal fun – ’

‘I wasn’t writing about animals...’

‘The reader is gripped in a vise of despair and bitterness from start to finish...’

‘I thought some of it was funny’.

‘Funny!’ Pope stared at him incredulously.

‘That part where the parents wear evening clothes to the older son’s funeral’, Jesse said, watching Pope’s expression and thinking, ‘What could be more funny than some niggers in evening clothes? I bet you laugh like hell at Amos and Andy on television’.

Looking suddenly lost, Pope said, ‘You killed one son and destroyed the other, killed the father and ruined the mother ...’ and Jess thought... ‘Yes, that makes it protest, all right. Negroes must always live happily and never die’.

Aloud he argued, ‘What about *Hamlet*’ Shakespeare destroyed everybody and killed everybody in that one’.

Pope shrugged, ‘Shakespeare’.

Jesse shrugged. ‘Jesus Christ. It’s a good thing he isn’t living now. His friends would never get a book published about him’.

Pope laughed. 'You're a hell of a good writer, Jesse. Why don't you write a Negro success novel? An inspirational story? The public is tired of the plight of the poor downtrodden Negro'.

'I don't have that much imagination'. (93 – 94)

What is immediately obvious about this exchange is that two conversations are going on, a conversation about literature (where 'great' authors somehow transcend 'protest' and produce 'art'), and one that Jesse is conducting in his mind about race, the latter of course being the real conversation. Jesse's last word, that he has no imagination, is highly ironic – the 'trickster' response to a white person, which expresses humility but actually meaning something else entirely. Himes exposes Pope as a hypocritical liberal who wilfully ignores racial injustice, and who uses a contempt for 'protest' as a means of hiding a deeper aversion to facing race problems.

Himes' frustration at being labelled a protest writer or a naturalist writer is indicative of the fact that he was consciously aware of the function of literary form in his own work. As Stephen Milliken, in his critical study of Himes in 1976, argues:

The label 'naturalistic' is a particularly attractive one, suggesting as it does the extraordinary fidelity of Himes' fiction to his actual experience, but this label too needs to be challenged. Himes is pre-eminently a writer who is fully aware of the gap that separates art from life, of the permanent incapacity of art to capture fully the complexity of life itself. His style can veer sharply from soberly conventional naturalism to the most radical extremes of surrealism. He is forever seeking the form that will fit, and he never denies to his characters the full range of contradictions that he finds in himself. (148)

Himes' use of literary form offers a challenge to the division, perpetuated by the New York intellectuals, between (a negative) social realism and their 'moral realism' (which was akin to modernism). Angus Calder, in his essay "Chester Himes and the Art of Fiction", makes an important distinction between two types of realism, which is useful in this respect. There is a realism, which he refers to as "normalism", which includes writers such as Fielding, Scott, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Turgenev, and, in the United States Henry James, Twain, Hemingway, and Saul Bellow. These writers conform to the essential normality of their societies, in that they "stress in their presentation of human nature those qualities which, binding men together in social fellowship, make 'normality' possible". In the American context, this is the belief "that the glory of the individual is that he is good" (104). In contrast, there are the "abnormalists", who include Sterne, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Melville and Faulkner. Their work "shows how far human nature, almost always, falls short of a working application of the ideal. Goodness itself in their worlds is so abnormal that demented Uncle Toby, illiterate Joe Gargery and epileptic Myshkin are its appropriate embodiments" (105). Calder is not arguing that either perspective is more 'true' to life or is superior in artistic terms to the other, but that "critics conventionally talk as if sober truth lay with the normalists and inspired fantasy with the brilliant deviants" (106). For Calder, Himes is, of course, an "abnormalist" but "this does not prevent him from being, in the best sense, a realist" (109). Himes' realism belongs to the same tradition as Dickens and Faulkner. His fiction is characterised by his skill at setting out a scene, a landscape, a workplace, or in depicting a character, in such minute detail and in such a naturalistic fashion, and undermining the expectations that are built up around this with modernist shifts in perception, through either a subtle

exaggeration or an incredible leap into the surreal or grotesque. James Sallis identifies Himes' technique as "a kind of jacking up of reality, amassing physical detail and impressions with such rapidity and to such a degree that they collapse into one another, become distorted, almost surreal" (51). Himes has pointed out how the notion of "reality" is particularly acute for African Americans in that "realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference" (*My Life of Absurdity* 109). Realism itself, for Himes, is a contested concept, where racial, class and gender differences compete for both legitimacy and expression; as we will see below, this problematic supplies a central theme in *If He Hollers*.

This interpretation of realism has important implications in reassessing Himes' use of modernism, and points to features in common with two of the major American modernist writers, Faulkner and Hemingway. As he pointed out to John A. Williams when discussing his influences: "I also like Faulkner because when Faulkner was writing his stories, his imaginative stories about the South, he was inventing the situations on sound ground – but still inventive" (70). In turn, it appears that Faulkner read Himes, and Himes recounts that one of his proudest moments was to discover that a copy of his novel *For Love of Imabelle* (republished as *A Rage In Harlem*) had been found in Faulkner's library after his death. There are also certain parallels between Himes and Hemingway, particularly in the way in which both writers utilise taut, sparse language and austere scenes and plots which overlay complex depths of meaning and symbolism. If Faulkner and Hemingway represent the two extremes of modernist writing – one an 'over-writing' and the other an 'under-writing' – to challenge the stability of language and narrative, then Himes offers an approach that utilises both approaches, and arguably, had he been a

white writer, Himes would have been regarded as a modernist. In *If He Hollers*, Himes presents a challenging tension between the naturalist narrative and the modernist themes that would feature in Ellison's *Invisible Man*: the narrator's extraordinary ambivalence and alienation – even from other African Americans and from his girl friend Alice; his struggle with stereotypes that are foisted on him; and the primacy of dreams that take on a Freudian character and condense the nightmarish aspects of life, raising the question of what is more real in the novel, the dreams or the “real” world?

The contrasting treatment of Himes, and of Faulkner and Hemingway, in the post-war years highlights the way that liberal critics ignored the more complex connections that could be made between writers across race and class. This affected the critical understanding of all writers, and the grounds of Himes' marginalisation were implicit in the broader literary culture. Lionel Trilling, in his essay “The Meaning of a Literary Idea”, first published in *The American Quarterly* in 1949, and included in *The Liberal Imagination*, expresses his admiration for Hemingway and Faulkner:

We feel that Hemingway and Faulkner are intensely at work upon the recalcitrant stuff of life; when they are at their best they give us the sense that the amount and intensity of their activity are in a satisfying proportion to the recalcitrance of the material. And our pleasure in their activity is made the more secure because we have the distinct impression that the two novelists are not under any illusion that they have conquered the material upon which they direct their activity. (297)

The two key themes that Trilling introduces here, the balance in their work between subject and form, and the lack of any final resolution, are central to the post-war liberal view of politics and literature. Yet the passage contains an important contradiction – it is

only possible to have a balance if there is some degree of consensus as to the overall structure within which this balance supposedly exists. Trilling addresses this, albeit obliquely, by suggesting that it is an awareness of contradiction and ambiguity itself that provides the template for the balance between form and content. Faulkner, for example, as a Southerner, is aware “of the inadequacy and wrongness of the very tradition he loves” (298). This awareness of contradiction in both Faulkner and Hemingway, and their refusal to attempt any “formulated solution”, means that they “rest content with the ‘negative capability’”. And this negative capability, “this willingness to remain in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, is not, as one tendency of modern feeling would suppose, an abdication of intellectual activity. Quite to the contrary, it is precisely an aspect of their intelligence, of their seeing the full force and complexity of their subject matter” (299). Ironically, whereas Faulkner and Hemingway are praised for their “negative capability” Himes was damned for exactly the same thing – his ironic and complex vision of race and class and his failure to resolve the race problem.

Himes’ subjection to this critical double standard is typical of the experiences of African American writers in the post-war years: they were judged on their ability to offer solutions to the problems of race. Initial reviews of *If He Hollers* illustrate this point. Roy Wilkins in *The Crisis* in 1945 wrote that, “it is a tale of confusion over the race problem and of blind revolt”, and *The American Mercury* review in 1946 found the end of the novel disappointing because the central character Bob Jones, “is left bitter, almost broken” (Sallis 109). The focus on what was perceived to be themes of failure, blind rage, and an inconclusive narrative structure, also influenced later critics, such as Robert Bone, who, in *The Negro Novel in America* in 1958, argued that the novel was “an

impressive failure with the accent on the adjective". For *Bone*, the novel suffers from too much rage and its failure to provide any resolution:

At bottom the problem is ideological: neither revenge nor accommodation is acceptable to Himes, and as a result, the novel flounders to an inconclusive finish .... The novel suffers ultimately from a one-to-one correlation between form and content: in portraying a divided personality, Himes has written a divided novel. But formless and chaotic is precisely what art cannot afford to be. (176)

Similarly, David Littlejohn in *Black on White* in 1966 argued that Bob Jones is "race-mad almost to the point of hysteria" (67). The contrast between the perceived lack of resolution in *If He Hollers* and the "negative capability" found in the work of Faulkner and Hemingway rests entirely on the belief that Himes was writing about the single issue of race, which has, moreover, imposed itself before the act of writing, thereby infecting the text with prior assumptions. For Trilling, the quality of Faulkner and Hemingway is that "in the work of both men the cogency is a function not of their conscious but of their unconscious minds" (*Liberal Imagination* 298). The contrast with the 'protest' of Himes therefore is that Himes' writing is driven entirely by a conscious (political or ideological) desire. Yet, as we will see, such an appraisal ignores the amount of focus Himes places on the unconscious drives in his characters in *If He Hollers*, and Himes' awareness of his own unconscious responses to politics, race, class and gender. In fact, Himes' speech at the University of Chicago, which so outraged his liberal audience, makes precisely the point that Trilling makes, that Himes was *consciously* aware of the *unconscious*, and often paradoxical, nature of experience. The difference, of course, is that Himes is applying this knowledge to African American working class experience that was



considered, by the liberal elite, as a single issue and therefore less complex than the important issues of “universal” identity.

This belief that race constitutes a single issue ignores the fact that race involves everything – love, sex, work, economics, class – *across* races and ethnicities, which is something that Himes and other African American writers were constantly attempting to explain. For Himes, the point was firstly that African American identity is an *American* identity, and secondly, that whiteness too is a racial identity, and not some neutral, natural state. Both of these elements feature strongly in *If He Hollers*. Race is the most pivotal, traumatic and intractable issue in American society, and permeates all aspects of American life. As Angus Calder argues, “There is a refusal to accept that the fact of race prejudice in the USA is no more intrinsically a ‘narrow’ theme than the factual relationship between marriage, money and class in early nineteenth century England which provided Jane Austen with virtually her whole subject matter” (111).

By being defined in absolute terms against the dominant literary culture, Himes’ 1940s fiction is read in a way that accentuates the realist and naturalist aspects of his work. These readings take his motive to be rage, and his explicit depiction of class conflict to be representative of a narrow commitment to the ‘social’ and the ‘political’ over broader existential, and supposedly universal, human dilemmas. However, such a reading is as much a comment on the post-war cultural climate as an accurate response to Himes’ fiction. As the following reading of *If He Hollers* argues, Himes does suggest the inter-relations between the personal and the political, by exploring existentialist themes but within the social, cultural and political context of the African American experience.

*If He Hollers Let Him Go*

It is possible to see why *If He Hollers* could be regarded as a proletarian novel. Inspired by Himes' own experiences of working in heavy industry in California during the early years of World War II, on the surface the novel's taut prose, sparse plot, and meticulous detailing of the working practices in a Los Angeles shipyard, bear the hallmarks of a realist or naturalist labour novel. The narrative structure, which focuses on four days in the life of Bob Jones, an educated African American in charge of a black gang who is demoted following an altercation with a white female worker, then falsely accused of rape and sent into the army, has the sort of inevitability characteristic of a socially determined naturalism. The Rosenwald Fund, who granted Himes a fellowship to write the novel, certainly had this type of novel in mind, as the grant was for Himes to write a "sociological novel about Negro life" (Embree 23).

However, Himes makes use of the physical aspects of the shipyard and the symbolic location of California to create a much more complex and ambiguous fiction. The descriptions of the working conditions in the shipyard emphasise the claustrophobic nature of the work:

It was cramped quarters aft, a labyrinth of narrow, hard-angled companionways, jammed with staging, lines, shapes, and workers who had to be contortionists first of all ... The air was so thick with welding fumes, acid smell, body odour, and cigarette smoke; even the steam from the blower couldn't get it out ... It was stifling hot, and the din was terrific. (20)

In this cauldron, not only do the workers have to be contortionists, but the nature of reality is equally bent and twisted out of shape. For the first time, many black and white

workers found themselves working alongside each other, drawn to California and the jobs generated by the war boom. The close physical proximity of these workers accentuates the nature of realism, yet, through the culture of racism, questions the basic premises of the reality around which realism can be formed. As Ralph Ellison identifies in his 1953 essay “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity”, “there is in progress between black and white Americans a struggle over the nature of reality” (26). By placing African American workers in such close proximity to largely undereducated, rural, working class Southern whites, Himes creates a tense environment in which racial conflict is pressed into the complexity of class dynamics with little or no room for manoeuvre. The central relationship in the novel is between Bob Jones, who is from Ohio, and Madge who is a working class white from Texas, and, in one of their ambiguous sexual encounters in Madge’s hotel room, Madge attempts to entice Bob to chase her and enact a rape. Bob refuses and replies, “‘Sit down,’ .... ‘This ain’t Texas’” (147). But neither is it Ohio. This is California, which is the symbol, but also the farthest limit, of Westward expansion and the American Dream, and here Himes presents a dystopian, Bosch-like drama of the inner contradictions of American identity, a dystopia which becomes internalised in Bob’s frequent nightmares.

Bob’s role, as the leaderman of a gang of African American workers, functions within the context of racial antagonisms and contradictions. As leaderman his job involves mediating between his workers and the white workers: “whenever they had trouble with the white workers they looked to me to straighten it out” (24). The key phrase here is “straighten it out” which suggests that Bob is able to mediate between workers to maintain a level of normality. However, immediately after this information is

imparted, Bob has to approach another leaderman, Hank, in order to request a temporary white tacker for his gang. After an initial exchange of banter, Hank realises what Bob wants and immediately changes his attitude. Bob recognises Hank's racist intention to hinder African American advancement, and that Hank had "decided to play it straight, where he always had the advantage" (25). The focus on "straight", which recurs throughout the novel, functions ironically, as what is straight is the balance of two unequal realities based upon racial identity. Unlike the other white leadermen, Bob's role, and *his* reality of work, is based not just on his technical or professional credentials, but primarily on his race, compounding his alienation both as a worker and as a person. When Bob approaches one of Hank's tackers, Madge, directly, she refuses, saying she "ain't going to work with no nigger!" to which Bob responds by saying, "Screw you then, you cracker bitch" (27). Bob's response leads him to be demoted from his managerial position and, while it sets up the narrative structure of the novel, highlights the competing claims on the nature of reality as it is mediated through the use, and racial ownership, of language.

The distorted reality for Bob is further complicated by his relationship with his girlfriend Alice, who is from a prosperous middle class African American family. Alice and her friends represent the liberal intelligentsia that so infuriated Himes. In a discussion with her friends, including a white liberal, on the "race problem", the contrast between her life and reality with the reality of Bob's workplace is keenly drawn. During the discussion, Alice and her friends move on to *Native Son*, at which point Himes becomes very explicit, and self referential, about his own literary position, and satirically attacks the liberal critics and intellectuals who criticised his work. For Alice's friend

Arline, *Native Son* “turned my stomach ... It just proved what the white Southerner has always said about us; that our men are rapists and murderers” (88). Leighton, a white friend of Alice’s agrees that ““the selection of Bigger Thomas to prove the point of Negro oppression was an unfortunate choice””, and this leads into a revealing discussion with Bob, who argues that ““you couldn’t pick a better person than Bigger Thomas to prove the point. But after you prove it, then what? Most people I know are quite proud of having made Negroes into Bigger Thomases””. Bob justifies his argument on the basis of his own experiences in the workplace:

‘I’ve got a job as a leaderman at a shipyard. I’m supposed to have a certain amount of authority over the ordinary workers. But I’m scared to ask a white woman to do a job. All she’s got to do is say I insulted her and I’m fired’. (88)

Leighton’s amazed response to this information, that he “didn’t realize industrial relations between white and coloured were that strained in our industries”, allows Himes a moment to satirise the liberal middle class; it also opens up the distance between the actual conditions of the workplace and the objectified and reified view of it by the middle class. Leighton’s own solution, which eventually reveals his communist or socialist sympathies (though the reader gets the feeling that Leighton would be more of a sympathiser than an activist), is that once all “the masses ... have achieved economic security, racial problems will reach a solution of their own accord”. Bob points out the naivety in this position, which sees the race problem as a single issue that can be rectified by another single issue, the economic. Bob reiterates his earlier point that racism is much more complex and involves cultural as well as economic forces: “It’s a state of mind. As long as the white

folks hate me and I hate them we can earn the same amount of money, live side by side in the same kind of house, and fight every day” (88).

In this conversation, the interpretation of *Native Son* by Alice’s friends is one that conforms to a reading of it as a realist or protest novel. Through Bob, Himes is offering a sophisticated re-reading of Wright’s novel, rather than recreating another version of Bigger Thomas. While Himes is suggesting that Bigger Thomas *is* an accurate symbolic depiction, he is also drawing attention to the precarious historical relationship between identity and reality. By raising the question of what comes after *Native Son* (“then what?”) Himes is pointing out that an unjust situation – identity predicated on racial prejudice – becomes ‘normal’ over time. No amount of economic or social “straightening out” can solve this skewed situation. As Bob points out, not only will blacks and whites still hate each other, but crucially, the white workers at the shipyard would actually be proud of turning a black worker into a Bigger Thomas: it is in the interests of the white workers to perpetuate an image of African Americans as deviant and ‘other’. The paradox is that while a novel like *Native Son* was necessary, it then becomes complicit with the historical cultural and social formation, and reformation, of racism. By drawing attention to the compounded effects of racism, Himes is critiquing both Marxist and liberal solutions. The critique of Marxism – which more precisely is aimed at the Communist Party and the trade unions, rather than Marxism as a general theory – is easy to discern: no matter how economically equal people are, racial hatred will still exist, which is borne out in Bob’s experiences at the shipyard where he earns as much, and sometimes more, than many white workers. The critique of the liberal position is much more sophisticated, and is central to the tension in the novel; in this

critique language, culture, and literary form become implicated within the complex dynamics of race and class.

In a crucial scene between Bob and Alice, Himes rehearses what would become one of the key points in his speech to the University of Chicago, which is that any attempt to come to terms with the race problem has to contend with the realities, however repugnant, that racism has produced. For Himes, the liberal view, that posits a simplistic solution to the race problem based on a 'universal' categories such as 'moralism', and which recoils from the caricature of a Bob Jones, is missing the point of the compounded effects of racism over time. Alice is advising Bob as to how he should go about getting his leaderman job back: "'Your only trouble is maladjustment, darling' ... 'Please don't think I'm trying to rub it in, but there're simply no other words to express it. You don't try and adjust your way of thinking to the actual conditions of life'" (166). This extremely loaded advice comes close to the end of the novel, where it is juxtaposed against the frustrating and violent reality of Bob's daily life. What Alice is arguing, in effect, is that Bob is out of step with reality, yet the paradox is that Bob's thinking stems directly from *his* reality.

Chapter Two narrates an ostensibly regular daily event in which Bob is driving to work with his riders, yet Himes develops this into a powerful drama in which the incessant presence of racial discrimination in Bob's life turns an everyday occurrence into a psychological minefield. Bob has the presence of mind to realise the pressure this embedded racism is exerting on him: "It was a bright June morning. The sun was already high. If I'd been a white boy I might have enjoyed the scramble in the early morning sun, the tight competition for a twenty-foot lead on a thirty-mile highway. But to me it was

racial” (14). Bob’s reality is bifurcated between the activity of day-to-day life and the psychological condition that racism imposes upon him. Since he became leaderman Bob has been having persistent nightmares in which he is cheated and attacked because of the colour of his skin. Every morning he wakes up feeling physically and psychologically tortured, “suspended in a vacancy” where “there was no meaning to anything” (2). In this state, between sleep and waking, Bob experiences an epiphany in which he understands how negotiating his everyday life necessitates a loss of self: “For a moment I felt torn all loose inside, shrivelled, paralysed, as if after a while I’d have to get up and die” (2). To take Alice’s advice, and adjust, means not adjusting his way of thinking to the *actual* conditions of life but adjusting his language and behaviour to a political and cultural *construction* of race.

Alice’s failure to grasp fully Bob’s situation derives from the perceived security of her own class position. When Bob arrives to take Alice out, Himes’ description of her neighbourhood is in stark contrast to Bob’s world, and marks out a clear distinction between their relative class positions:

Alice’s folks lived in a modern two-storey house in the middle of the block ....

The air smelled of freshly cut grass and gardenias in bloom. A car passed, leaving the smell of burnt gasoline. Some children were playing in the yard a couple of houses down, and all up and down the street people were working in their yards. I felt like an intruder and it made me slightly resentful. (49)

In contrast to the shipyard or Bob’s neighbourhood, this is a safe middle class suburban environment where even the air is clean and unpolluted, there are no raised voices, the front door “opened noiselessly”, and the fumes from a single car, like Bob’s own



presence, are noticeable intruders. Not only is there physical safety, but the silence conveys an absence of the racist language that Bob has to face at work. Alice, and her family and friends, use a clipped and precise Anglicised middle class diction. Himes places particular emphasis on the exact way in which Alice speaks, when, to substantiate her advice about “adjustment”, she argues that “there’re simply no other words to express it” (166). While this expresses the belief in a fixed relation between language and reality, emphasised by the use of the word “simply”, there is also a minor slip in her use of “there’re”, rather than ‘there are’ which would be more in keeping with her way of speaking throughout the novel; this emphasises the unstable nature of language and its relation to black identity. Alice’s mother, more practised in this middle class discourse, has fully incorporated Anglicised English into her speech, marking her full assimilation, through a middle class lifestyle, into white discourse. Making small talk with Bob, she announces that:

‘It’s so hard on all of us. You know Charles, our chauffer, was drafted, and Norma left us to take a defence job. We only have Clara now, and she’s getting so temperamental, I do declare – ’ She broke off, looking at me. ‘Bob, you look very nice tonight. You wear evening attire very well indeed’. (50)

Alice’s family are able to assimilate into white discourse through the cultural legitimacy afforded them by their middle class economic status, but this necessitates a denial of their own cultural heritage.

In contrast, within the working class environment of the shipyard, job insecurity and low wages produce an environment in which language is used as a means of racial

subjugation and control. When Bob picks up his riders on the way to work, they exchange banter in which there are shared linguistic and cultural codes:

Smitty squirmed over to give Johnson more room. ‘By God, here’s a man wakes up evil every morning. Ain’t just *some* mornings; this man wakes up evil *every* morning’. He looked around at Johnson. ‘What’s the matter with you, man, do your old lady beat you?’ (11)

However, later in the day, when Bob approaches Hank for the loan of a tacker, what begins as a similar breezy conversation becomes something else entirely as Hank’s racism directs the conversation; this initiates an exchange that pushes the limits of his ability to fully communicate with white workers, and the conversation quickly descends into a racial conflict:

‘You’re doing fine yourself’, I said. ‘The folks back in Georgia wouldn’t know you’’

He kept his smile, but he began getting dirty. ‘You said it, bo’. Then to the women, ‘This boy’s a real killer, got all the little brown girls in a dither about him’. To me again, ‘How does you do it, bo?’

I got all set to curse him out; then right in the middle of it I realized that I was jumping the gun; he hadn’t really said enough to start a rumpus about. I had to laugh ... I said, ‘Don’t sell me *too* hard, buddy, you just might find a buyer’.

Hank caught it first; the creases stayed in his face but his smile went. The two women dug it from the change in his expression; neither blushed; they just got that sudden brutal look’. (25)

At this moment the dynamic shifts, and even though Bob and Hank revert, on the surface, to a more functional discussion about work, the power structure between them reveals itself, and this is the moment that Hank decides “to play it straight, where he always had the advantage”. The manifestation of racial power relations through speech is accentuated further by Himes’ depiction of jokes throughout the novel. When Bob’s gang are alone, they pass the time telling each other jokes, the majority of which are specific to African American culture, yet they are loathe to sharing these with any white worker. When Bob’s replacement, a white worker, attempts to join in, he is quickly put down. However, whenever Bob has to approach a white manager, he is frequently left to wait, and is subjected to listening to racist jokes.

For Bob to take Alice’s advice to adjust would not only necessitate a split in his identity between external language and his inner reality, but also would involve a choice in class allegiance as well as class values. To remain at the shipyard would entail a constant subjection to the reality of racism, both physically and linguistically; the choice that Alice is presenting is a middle class one which, because of the constant racism at the shipyard, cannot be applied to this working class environment. The class division, and the impossibility of transferring the reality of one on to the other, is something that Bob is acutely aware of, as he sarcastically responds to Alice’s mother’s comment that not many of his co-workers would have much occasion to wear evening dress: ““No, I guess not. You can’t be a gentleman and a worker too”” (50). Alice is equally aware of this divide, but, despite her occasional scolding of Bob for his boorish working class behaviour, she offers a seemingly pragmatic justification for her behaviour towards him: ““I want a husband who is important and respected enough and wealthy enough so that I can avoid a

major part of the discriminatory practices which I am sensible enough to know I cannot change” (97). She retains a simplistic view of race relations, by euphemistically referring to them as “discriminatory practices” as if race relations were mere practices unconnected to discourse and ideology. For Bob, this view ignores the reality of his own experiences in the workplace, and he wonders if Alice really cannot grasp his argument, “Maybe she really couldn’t ... maybe none of her class could face it” (97). These discussions between Bob and Alice, imbued with the dynamics of class and language, also reflect Himes’ own unease about the middle class assumptions of some of his contemporaries such as Wright and Ellison. Ironically, the discussions between Bob and Alice, and the discussions of Wright’s *Native Son*, were repeated by critics of *If He Hollers* who appeared to adopt Alice’s and her friends’ arguments without noticing Himes’ critical use of these discourses.

To see Bob as representing rage and the novel as protest is, like Alice and Deighton, to see Bob in contrast to the liberal’s perspective of language and reality – it is rage because it departs from the ‘norm’. However, this norm is based upon a knowable reality, from which Bob is alienated, and, while alienation might be considered pathological in one sense, it is also a reality in itself – not a distortion of reality – complete with the complexity and depth and the structures of feeling of any reality. In fact, the dramatic power of *If He Hollers* does not merely reside in the ending where Bob is sent off to the army. To focus primarily on the ending is to read the novel through a naturalist frame of reference in which Bob’s fate is predetermined through his alienation and subsequent rage. Himes offers a more complex dramatisation of Bob’s fate that

emerges from the tension between the naturalist inevitability of the plot and the modernist themes of alienation and epiphany.

While the dream sequences draw attention to Bob's alienation and the fragile nature of his reality, there is a crucial moment in the novel where the tension between his imaginative and 'actual' reality occurs during the day at work. The moment when Bob is most at ease with himself and his own identity is where Himes allows Bigger Thomas to permeate Bob's consciousness. He decides, in effect, to 'become' Bigger Thomas: to rape Madge and to kill a fellow white worker. When Bob makes the decision to kill the white worker, the freedom he feels is total:

I was going to kill him if they hung me for it. I thought pleasantly ... All the tightness that had been in my body, making my motions jerky, keeping my muscles taut, left me and I felt relaxed, confident, strong. I felt just like I thought a white boy oughta feel. I had never felt so strong in all my life. (38)

He experiences similar moments of release when he thinks of Madge, yet ultimately he cannot complete either act. As soon as he begins to rationalise his motivation he realises that he is caught in a bind, and in this way he embodies the paradoxical limits of *Native Son*. To act as Bigger Thomas offers an affirmation of a culturally defined identity, and there is a certain existential freedom in this, in that the external act is precisely that, just an act; the freedom to choose in itself is liberating and it retains a certain internal integrity. Equally, however, Bob realises the self-negation that is involved in adopting this identity, not only in the splitting of self, but in the fact that he becomes 'just' another Bigger Thomas. By remaining in a working class environment, Bob oscillates between a naturalist inevitability and moments of modernist epiphany. However, these epiphanies

do not suggest the liberating Hegelian potential of a reconciliation of the 'individual' and the 'universal' that informs the post-war liberals' understanding of modernism. Rather, Himes, like Marx in his reversal of Hegel, challenges this belief by drawing attention to the material racial and class composition of Bob's alienation.

Bob's alienation, and inability to act, can also be read as a form of impotency that is manifest in his relationship with Madge. Their racial antagonisms in a racist working class environment become sublimated into sexual tension, which ultimately leads to Bob's arrest and subsequent forced enlistment in the army. In their relationship, Bob and Madge enact a spiral of mistrust, veering between aggressiveness and defensiveness. Himes utilises the symbol of the mask, so central to racial exchanges in American culture. It is the impossibility of true communication between blacks and whites that the mask symbolises, as described by Ralph Ellison in his 1958 essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke". Here, Ellison points out that "America is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past" (219). Central to the mask, for Ellison, is that it symbolises the suspicion on both sides, especially the way in which whites on one level deny African Americans any *American* identity, yet at the same time secretly, and fearfully, know "that both were 'mammy-made' right here at home" (219). This mutual suspicion plays out in social discourse in which:

The white man's half-conscious awareness that his image of the Negro is false makes him suspect the Negro of always seeking to take him in, and assume his motives are anger and fear – which very often they are. On his side of the joke the Negro looks at the white man and finds it difficult to believe that the 'grays' ...

can be so absurdly self-deluded over the true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness. To him the white man seems a hypocrite who boasts of pure identity while standing with his humanity exposed to the world. (219)

The masks adopted by Madge and Bob are defined in their first meeting, where Himes is attentive to the complicity of a racist culture:

We stood there for an instant, our eyes locked, before either of us moved; then she deliberately put on a frightened, wide-eyed look and backed away from me as if she was scared stiff, as if she was a naked virgin and I was King Kong. (19)

By stressing these cultural stereotypes in this first meeting, Himes sets up the performative nature of their subsequent exchanges, in which their acting out operates on a level of cultural exchange embedded in the social relations of their working class situation.

It is this intractable nature of black-white relationships in the working class environment that provides the central dynamic of the narrative; the plot revolves entirely around two key scenes between Bob and Madge. The first results in Bob's demotion, and the second, when Madge accuses Bob of rape, finally seals Bob's fate. These scenes are not only indicative of Madge's *being* white, but also show the *performance* of whiteness. Himes draws attention throughout the novel to whiteness, challenging the idea that is something ingrained and 'natural', and pointing out instead that it is an unstable identity performed in front of blacks. At the close of the drive to work in Chapter Two, Bob remarks that "the white folks had sure brought their white to work with them that morning" (15). This performance of whiteness moreover is predicated on an assumption about African American identity that sees the African as signifying foreignness and

which denies the American context of this identity. As Bob points out, this is not only a misreading of African American identity, but also ignores the ‘alien’ in white identity:

They kept thinking about me in connection with Africa. But I wasn’t born in Africa. I didn’t know anyone who was. I learned in history that my ancestors were slaves brought over from Africa. But I’d forgotten that, just like the aristocratic blue bloods of America have forgotten what they learned in history – that most of their ancestors were the riffraff of Europe – thieves, jailbirds, and outcasts. (152)

This interplay between black and white in *If He Hollers* illustrates how white hegemony is maintained through linguistic and cultural discourses, how this functions in a working class situation, and how it challenges liberal assumptions about race and class. Bob is unable to ‘adjust’ because he is not allowed to. As whiteness is an unstable identity that acquires its legitimacy through a constant denigration of the black ‘other’, it is the white workers, in an unstable economic situation, who are able to adjust, in any situation, in order to maintain their hegemony over the African American workers. Indeed, like the white workers in Harriette Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*, working class whiteness *needs* the African American other to ameliorate its own precarious economic position. Despite the booming war-time economy, African American workers like Bob are the most vulnerable members of the working class. It is Bob’s relationship with Madge, in which Madge is able to exercise her whiteness over Bob’s seniority and expose his inferiority as both a manager and, for Bob, as a man, which provides the tension that leads to the dramatic final section of the novel.

When Bob approaches Madge to ask her to help out with his gang, and recognises her from their earlier meeting, he is fully aware of what will happen next: “I knew the



instant I recognized her that she was going to perform then – we both would perform” (27). The instantaneity of Bob’s awareness of how they are going to perform according to cultural values and racial stereotypes draws attention to how class context affects racial behaviour. In contrast to Alice, who in her middle class environment can be detached from the ‘race problem’, Bob realises that the exchange with Madge in the workplace is going to have inevitable consequences. Either she can agree to work for him, and thereby potentially risk alienating herself from her fellow white workers, or she can assert her whiteness over Bob’s seniority. Madge’s refusal and the subsequent exchange of racial insults (“nigger”, “cracker bitch”) which leads to Bob’s demotion, confirms Bob’s powerlessness as a manager, and Madge’s assertion of whiteness subverts Alice’s middle class advice. The sexual connotation in Bob’s use of the word “perform” presages the way in which Bob experiences his later inability to deal with the ambiguous sexual tension between them as a form of impotency.

After Bob has been demoted, Madge’s leaderman, Don, automatically gives Bob her home address, convinced, through his racist assumptions, that Bob would want to rape her. Bob in turn is unable to challenge this presumption because he is locked into a racial, class and gender discourse that he has no means of countering:

It was funny in a way. I couldn’t tell him that I *didn’t* want her because she was a white woman and he was a white man, and something somewhere way back in my mind said that would be an insult. And I couldn’t tell him that I *did* want her, because the same thing said that would be an insult too. (119)

Bob is never quite sure what is driving him to seek Madge out – because she is a white woman, because he wants revenge, or because he recognises some form of attraction towards her – and at moments he questions his motivation, yet is unable to rationalise it fully:

She wore a maddening, teasing smile and her eyes were laughing at me. I went so blind mad I was petrified. Not mad at her; at myself for being pushed around by a notion. If you could just get over the notion, women were the same, black or white. (130)

Bob's confusion about his identity and his tormented psychological state is a representation of Himes' argument in his 1948 speech to the University of Chicago, in which he argued that "homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority" are "the daily horrors, the daily realities, the daily experiences of an oppressed minority" (Sallis 112).

Although Madge's perspective in these exchanges is never clear, there is the implication that, while her flirting is racist role playing, there is also some genuine attraction for Bob. This ambiguity suggests an important paradox in this absurd courtship: that neither of them is fully sure of their motivation, yet both are extremely proficient in adopting and performing their assigned cultural roles. In a thwarted, albeit perverse, love story, the impossibility of their connecting on any emotional level, and the deep contradictions of their interaction, shows how deeply racial conflict has become embedded both in the working class environment and in the ineffectual reasoning of middle class liberals. Madge is left with very little option about how to behave in moments of crisis; she does not have the liberal middle class luxury of space, either

physically or culturally, to break away from her peers. In the first incident, for Madge to agree to work with Bob's gang would alienate her from her work colleagues. In the second, when she finds herself locked in the cabin that contains a bed, with Bob, and with workers attempting to break in, she resorts to the one word that she knows can save her from shame and humiliation, and possibly the loss of her job, and one that she knows will be believed by the white workers.

While I would not regard Madge as much as a victim to the same extent as Bob – after all, the company, realising that she is not telling the truth, closes ranks around her – these scenes are indicative of how whiteness is utilised in the workplace as a form of control. Madge's role in the novel is as a counterpoint to Alice, and demonstrates how the working class become interpellated through racial and gender expectations, as a form of economic control. The entry of many African Americans into manufacturing jobs due to the demands of the war economy was a mixed blessing. While it provided them with entry into work previously denied them, it brought black and white workers together in an uneasy cohabitation in which overt racism was experienced on a daily basis. It is the continuous exposure to racism which produces the pathological behaviour that concerned Himes, a situation that could not be resolved simply by an appeal to better judgement. These ingrained cultural and social antagonisms, through which the working class, both black and white, are forced to perform, are constitutive of the means by which economic production is secured. At the close of the novel, when Mr Houghton, the President of Atlas Corporation, explains to Bob why he is not going to be charged with rape, he reveals the motivation behind the decision:

‘She realizes that, should she press charges against you, it might in all likelihood create racial tension among the employees and seriously handicap our production schedule, so she has consented to withdraw her charge against you .... It is a patriotic gesture comparable only to the heroism of men in battle, and I have the highest admiration for her’. (201)

As Bob correctly guesses, what the company has realised is that Madge’s claim could not be substantiated, and what they really fear is a public debate over race relations. The company’s ultimate aim is to secure production; for this to be achieved, the racial and gender tensions and prejudices of the workers need to be performed covertly, and not publicly debated.

To regard *If He Hollers* as protest, or even as a naturalist text, is to adopt the liberal middle class perspective and offers a superficial reading of the novel. Bob is no Bigger Thomas and he has committed no crime. His anger is confusing and paradoxical and emerges out of complex racial prejudices and class inequalities. Himes dramatises this through a powerful tension between a number of literary forms that subverts the liberal distinctions between naturalism, modernism and realism. Rather than ‘looking back’ to Wright, Himes is redeveloping the African American working class novel in response to major changes in American society. The critical blindness to his work is symptomatic of the liberal tendency to see race and class in one-dimensional terms. In this respect Himes’ work displays an awareness of a crucial theme in African American culture, that of double-consciousness. This theme, of being compelled to internalise white values and play out roles imposed by white society, dominates twentieth century African American culture, all the way from W. E. B. Dubois to Wright, Himes and

Ellison, to Amiri Baraka, and remains one of the chief concerns regarding the fundamental antagonisms of African American identity. At one point in the novel, just before he is accused of rape, Bob makes an effort to try out Alice's advice and see if he can work towards getting his leaderman's job back, reminding himself that he would "have to take people at face value" (175). The irony here is that this is precisely what *is* happening, and this is the problem; it is the need to see beyond the facial (and racial) features that is the crux of the novel. The same trope is evident in *Invisible Man* when the narrator recalls his old literature teacher at college teaching Joyce and suggesting that

‘Stephen’s problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals’. (354)

*If He Hollers*, like all of Himes' fiction, is attempting to move beyond seeing race relations at face value – that is to say as a universal given – which he sees as a liberal failing. For Himes, there can be no equilibrium arrived at through some moral realist or universalist position.

Himes' method is both dialectical and literary-historical. The dialectic between dream and reality in *If He Hollers* connects back to *Native Son* and looks ahead to the marijuana dream that opens *Invisible Man* and the surreal nightmare of Baraka's 1964 play *Dutchman*. The liberal critical resistance to *If He Hollers* stems from the novel's engagement with the complexities of class and race. It is an engagement which contradicts liberal expectations, and which challenges, in fundamental ways, the emerging consensus of a 'classless' society within which the 'race problem' can be solved through appeals to shared 'universal' values.

## Chapter Six

### Post-industrial Culture and Working Identity in Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

The title of Hubert Selby's 1964 novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, taken from a road sign on the Belt Parkway on the boundary between Brooklyn and Queens, subtly evokes a crucial tension in post-war American culture. In selecting a road sign *outside* of the Brooklyn neighbourhood of the novel, Selby focuses attention on the disparity between the powerful symbol of the open road, which embodies the myth of the American promise of renewal, and the everyday reality of the inhabitants of Selby's Brooklyn, for whom the sign has another reality and meaning. The *choice* of the exit is only available to those on the outside, that is to say the affluent who are able to exercise a degree of self-determination. For Selby's working class characters, trapped in a cycle of poverty, unemployment, limited education, poor housing, there is no exit; the only last exit for the teenagers at the beginning of the novel will be the violent and unforgiving Landsend housing project of the final chapter. In *Last Exit to Brooklyn* Selby presents a brutal reminder that for many working class communities in the 1950s the promise of middle class consumerism and lifestyle was merely a distant, and frustrating, cultural illusion.

*Last Exit* has achieved a certain cult status, due primarily to the censorship battles over its publication, the violent 1989 film version, and through the success of the film version of Selby's later novel, *Requiem for a Dream*. Surprisingly, apart from the work of James R. Giles on naturalism, *Last Exit* has only attracted limited attention from literary critics. This neglect is indicative of how the fragmentation of class identity, through the absence of any strong class discourse, has affected literary categorisations in

the post-war period. Possibly the novel's explicit violence has encouraged critics to consider it in marginal terms: for instance Malcolm Bradbury in *The Modern American Novel* refers to it as "hallucinatory naturalism" (152), and Morris Dickstein as "violent and sensational" (73). In an interview in 1992 Selby complains about this lack of attention, citing a *Smithsonian* article on Brooklyn writers that ignored him, and points out that "you can hate a writer, but how can you not include my name with a list of writers associated with Brooklyn? That's the attitude of the literary establishment towards me" (Vorda 290). I would suggest that this blindness to Selby's achievement is at least partly symptomatic of the larger failure to engage with class. In an atomised society and critical community, without the broader societal interconnections offered by class analysis, Selby's Brooklyn becomes detached from the hegemonic norm as a violent ghettoised 'other'.

Selby offers, in *Last Exit*, an early engagement with the effects of the emergence of the post-industrial society on traditional blue-collar working class communities in the 1950s. The shift from the dominance of a manufacturing and production economy to a service economy began, as Daniel Bell pointed out in his 1973 study *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, in the 1950s. According to Bell, "by 1956 the number of white-collar workers, for the first time in the history of industrial civilization, outnumbered the blue-collar workers in the occupational structures" (17). In Bell's opinion, this transformation not only marked the decline of the manufacturing workforce, but also signalled the end of the working class. Bell was particularly hostile to those critics, such as Radovan Richta, Serge Mallet, Andre Gorz, Alain Toraine and Roger Garaudy, who argued that, in fact, the emergence of a post-industrial society saw a broadening of the working class,

incorporating technically skilled and white-collar workers. For Bell, these critics had “become tediously theological in their debates about the ‘old’ and ‘new’ working class” and he argued that “one cannot save the theory by insisting that almost everybody is a member of the ‘new working class’” (40). The problem with Bell’s argument here is that he attempts to validate his own theories on a reversal of the same premise: that the emergence of post-industrial society is synonymous with the decline of the working class. To see the working class, as Bell frequently does, as consisting primarily of blue-collar workers, is to overlook the social and economic estrangement to be found among the new white-collar workers. More importantly, it ignores the fact that class experience is not formed entirely on occupational position, but also on the emotional ties – what Raymond Williams identified as the “structures of feeling” – of family, community and culture, which have much deeper historical roots, and which do not disappear overnight (Williams *Long Revolution* 64).

Like Swados, Selby recognises that the working class cannot be quantified, or its identity defined, by the number of manufacturing jobs. As fiction, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* delves beneath occupation statistics and dramatises the actual lived experience of working class life: as Selby pointed out when asked about his work being described as social realism offering a mimetic reflection of society, his intent is “to put the reader through an emotional experience” (Vorda 290). Written as a series of short stories from the mid 1950s onwards, and not published until 1964, *Last Exit* provides a view on an important period in the early stages of post-industrial society, where the decline of manufacturing and the concomitant cultural changes had not yet been fully registered. The central themes of *Last Exit* actively engage with two major challenges facing



working class communities through the development of post-industrialism in the 1950s: the social and economic crises facing urban blue-collar communities, and the effects on this community of a dominant culture that is directed towards middle class consumerism.

### **A Speeding Culture**

The tensions between culture and society that Bell sees occurring in the 1950s can be traced to longstanding contradictions in American national identity. The United States was founded on the ideological belief in individual freedom, but this principle is frequently at odds with the social and economic realities of class and community, and this tension has informed the development, and the particular characteristic features, of American literature. This conflict embedded in American identity is most clearly seen in the negotiation of the twin impulses of movement and settlement. Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 Frontier Thesis is one of the most prominent examples of the way in which the dominant interpretation of American identity became predicated on movement and individualism, rather than on class or community: for Turner, it was "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics ... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism" (162). Although Turner announced the 'closing' of the frontier by the end of the nineteenth century, the impact on American identity, self-consciousness and even on institutions, had become deeply entrenched. Arguably, the American novel found its distinctive voice and form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the romance and the lure of the frontier, in such writers as James Fenimore Cooper in his "Leatherstocking" novels and Mark Twain, developing a distinctive American cultural mythology. But with the closing of the frontier a new problem emerged – in mediating

between the romance of the frontier and the desire for home, between a restless individualism and the realities of community – which found voice in such novels as Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920).

Whereas in the 1920s this tension between individualism and home was dramatised against the backdrop of material wealth and commercialism, most famously in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the 1930s offered a tragic re-affirmation of the myth of the frontier. In novels such as Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs* (1930), Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933), James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Nelson Algren's vastly underrated *Somebody in Boots* (1935), and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the mass dislocation of workers throughout the country searching for jobs was, in part, a re-visiting of the frontier myth, but one that lacked the 'romance' of the original westward expansion, and in which class conflict was brought to the fore. However, there was still a residual element of the original frontier myth in these novels, particularly a rugged individualism, the dignity of the working man, and the importance of family values. It is these residual romantic traces which critics in the 1950s were able to accentuate at the expense of class conflict in order to create a homogenised literary tradition leading inevitably to the individualism and liberal consensus of the post-war years.

By the 1950s, the vast and rapidly expanding transport and communications networks had significantly condensed physical distance. The economic imperative to migrate westwards was replaced by the ambiguous promise of moving to the suburbs; in

effect, the frontier had become material and therefore more explicitly class based, rather than geographical. In this contracted social sphere, the “restless nervous energy” generated by the challenges and promises of the frontier became sublimated into culture. Throughout the 1950s, the pace of American culture quickened, as W. T. Lhamon argues in *Deliberate Speed*: “the development cycles of fiction, jazz, film, and rock ‘n’ roll all stepped up” (25). Of crucial importance to this accelerating culture was the impact of new technologies, affecting cultural expression along with the generic and formal categorisations of art forms:

There can be no doubting the way the era’s technological changes quickened the development of every one of its forms. Genres, forms, and idea constellations in this time have taken on a deliberate speed, circling faster than anyone was accustomed to seeing them come and go. (27)

But this speeding up of culture can be read in two contradictory ways. For those, like Daniel Bell, who saw the emergence of post-industrial society as synonymous with the triumph of liberal democracy, these cultural changes heralded a new era of cultural expression and critique. As Bell explains in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capital*, the dominant impulse of modern culture had become “a self-conscious search for future forms and sensations”. Culture had become legitimised, so that “our culture has an unprecedented mission: it is an official, ceaseless searching for a new sensibility” (17). Bell saw no conflict between the speeding up of culture and the hegemonic social and economic ideological structures that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s as this autonomous culture seeped down into the social sphere whereby individuals exercise

what he calls “discretionary social behaviour”. For Bell, identity becomes predicated, not on an individual’s economic position, but on culture and taste: “As the traditional class structure dissolves, more and more individuals want to be identified, not by their occupational base (in the Marxist sense), but by their cultural tastes and life-styles” (20). However, Bell’s argument, essentially a reiteration of his earlier arguments in *The End of Ideology*, coheres with the consensual ideology of the 1950s which, by the late 1960s, had become entrenched. More specifically, it ignores the economic factors at play. Bell seems oblivious of the fact that whereas individuals may very well not want to be identified with their occupational base – not so surprising when the work is tedious and demeaning – this base nonetheless *determines* the discretionary income necessary to pursue a “cultural” lifestyle. Moreover, as Lhamon points out, the quickening of culture does not necessarily mean that it has become autonomous. Culture it is still related, to some extent, to economics: “The implicit aesthetic of a deliberately speedy style matches the consumer economics of the period” (7).

While Lhamon is careful not to identify any absolute deterministic relationship between culture and economics (notably in his choice of the verb “matches”), he nonetheless questions the ability of culture to operate autonomously. While Lhamon argues that “Improvisation and emotional volubility became hallmarks of culture” (7) in the 1950s, alongside this, as he notes later in the same chapter, “came an emphasis on repetition ... on replication, on control or manipulation or processing of surfaces” (25). And so the potential for cultural innovation that Bell identifies in the post-industrial society can equally be read as a function of a commodified culture; it is what Fredric

Jameson identifies as the cultural logic of late capitalism: a “culture of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (45).

### **Last Exit**

The first page of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* draws attention to the disjuncture between a speeding commercialised culture and the realities of working class life, where Selby introduces the gang of teenagers who hang around the diner near the Brooklyn Army base:

A warm clear night and they walked in small circles, dragging the right foot slowly in the hip Coxsackie shuffle, cigarettes hanging from mouths, collars of sportshirts turned up in the back, down and rolled in front. Squinting, Spitting. Watching cars roll by. Identifying them. Make. Model. Year. Horse power. Overhead valve. V-8. 6, 8, a hundred cylinders. Lots a horses. Lots a chrome. Red and Amber grill lights. Yasee the grill on the new Pontiac? Man, thats real sharp. Yeah, but a lousy pickup. Cant beat a Plymouth for a pickup. Shit. Cant hold the road like a Buick ... Straightaways. Turns. Outrun the law. Dynaflows. Hydramatics. Cant get started. (3)

Despite this cultural hyperactivity and their knowledge of cars, these characters are going nowhere, just walking round “in small circles”. Devoid of ambition or future plans, the gang constantly repeat the same daily routine. The ambiguity of their situation – cultural innovators or passive consumers – is emphasised though Selby’s use of language. While rhythmic and energetic, the sentences become progressively shorter, and the staccato tone and repetition mirrors the characters’ real situation. This teenage gang adopt an outlaw

culture, but this culture, like the urban cultural styles that would develop later in the century, has only an ironic link to the frontier: the desire to “outrun the law” is rendered meaningless. After savagely beating the soldier, they make no attempt to escape, and the police know exactly where they are.

The juxtaposition of the gang’s lifestyle and the title of the first chapter, “Another Day Another Dollar”, with its resonance of industrial labour, opens up the broader socio-economic circumstances of the neighbourhood. The major employer, the local factory, is in the midst of a major strike, and employment opportunities are limited. The chapter on the strike, at over 100 pages, dominates the novel, with the remaining chapters being a series of interlinking stories set around the events of the strike. This structure is similar to the one used by Swados in *On the Line*, but here the social fragmentation of the factory is extended to the whole community. Unlike Swados’ automotive factory, based on the Mahwah plant in New Jersey and situated away from any urban centre, the one in *Last Exit* is situated squarely in the neighbourhood, yet appears to be equally disassociated from the community. Despite the rhetoric of the union leaders, confident that they can win major concessions, the early effects of post-industrialism on the importance of manufacturing, and on the efficacy of labour unions, are already manifest. Through careful planning and outsourcing, utilising the new national manufacturing and distribution networks, the management are able to outlast the strike; in fact, the management actually welcome the strike as an opportunity to break the union. The workers, initially caught up in the enthusiasm of the anti-management rhetoric of the union leaders, quickly become bored and indifferent to the routine of picketing.

What is distinctive about the strike in *Last Exit*, compared to those in other late 1940s and 1950s novels, such as Alexander Saxton's *The Great Midland* (1948), Phillip Bonosky's *Burning Valley* (1953) and Margaret Graham's *Swing Shift* (1956), all of which look backwards to historical industrial conflicts, is that Selby is attuned to the changes in labour management relations in the 1950s. Unlike these other novels, the union leaders in *Last Exit* make no reference in their rhetoric to class conflict, but concentrate entirely on the minutiae of work contracts. Reflecting the labour management accords of the 1950s, Selby makes clear that ultimately the strike is settled through a negotiation, in which the union and management conclude a deal which benefits them both at the expense of the workers. The President of the local union announces the deal as an "honourable contract", yet neglects to inform the workers that they will "be assessed \$10 each month for next year – about half their increase in pay – to build up the now depleted strike fund" (200). Combined with the loss of earnings through the strike, the workers are in fact worse off. Selby here dramatises how the erosion of working class consciousness in the 1950s was facilitated through the trade unions' inability to effectively foster working class consciousness. Locked into the culture of the labour management accord, unions increasingly focused on the maintenance of their position and the negotiation of complex contracts. Selby's depiction of the strike anticipates the crisis in the union movement from the 1970s onwards: decreasing membership, failure to halt anti-union labour laws, and an inability to extend membership beyond manufacturing.

In *Last Exit* the character of Harry Black embodies the way in which the failure of the trade unions to successfully engage with the rise of post-industrialism affected

working class identity. Whereas working class characters in 1930s labour novels primarily had to contend with unemployment, economic hardship and political conflict, the workers in *Last Exit* exist in a larger hegemonic culture that prides itself on high employment, material wealth and political consensus. In the atomised post-war society of the “lonely crowd”, in which the problems of production have seemingly been replaced by the problems of consumption and wealth, working class identity can no longer be articulated against any tangible antagonistic other. This goes some way to explaining why, In *Last Exit*, Harry Black who has a steady job as a lathe operator, and, as a shop steward, has job security, is one of the most miserable, and loathsome, blue-collar characters in American literature.

“Strike” opens with Harry at home, suffocating under his distaste and hatred for his wife and son, harbouring violent thoughts against them both. He is unable to make love to his wife except violently: “Harry fumbled at her crotch anxious and clumsy with anger; wanting to pile drive his cock into her” (108); afterwards he recoils in disgust, able to do nothing “but endure the nausea and slimy disgust” (109). He is unable to sleep, the mental torment manifesting itself in real physical pain: “He tightened the muscles in his toes until they cramped, the pain increasing; trying to concentrate on the pain enough to forget everything else. His toes felt as if they would shatter and his feet started to cramp” (110). When he eventually does fall asleep, he has recurrent violent nightmares of being attacked by Harpies and ripped to pieces, waking, as usual, unable to breathe and with a dead weight on his chest.

Harry, in his experience of internal hatred, his physical and mental violence towards those around him, and his nightmares, resembles the character of Bob Jones in *If*



*He Hollers*, and many of the characters in Harvey Swados' *On the Line*. Like theirs, Harry's masculine blue-collar identity is unable to find any satisfying external outlet. However, whereas Bob Jones' frustration comes from racial discrimination, Harry, like the characters in *On the Line*, is attempting to cope with a new socio-economic situation that he cannot fully grasp. Harry's sense of his identity is constructed in terms of a very narrow, and anachronistic, understanding of labour relations; as a shop steward he sees industrial conflict as entirely between a homogenised blue-collar workforce and the 'bosses'. As the strike is about to get under way, and Harry's self-importance increases, his naïve understanding of the strike becomes clearer:

With each day Harry felt bigger. He walked around the plant waving at the guys, yelling to them above the noise; thinking that soon it would be silent. The whole fuckin shop/d be quiet. And he had cartoon like images in his mind of dollar bills with wings flying out of the window, out of the pocket and pocketbook of a fat baldheaded cigar smoking boss; and punks with white shirts and expensive suits sitting at an empty desk and opening empty pay envelopes. (123)

As the strike progresses, it is clear that it is not the kind of industrial conflict that Harry imagines, and that Harry is in fact irrelevant and dispensable. Not only is he the "worst lathe operator in the factory" (113), but he is utterly ineffectual during the strike, spending most of the time drunk. As a shop steward, his petty adherence to the minutiae of work contracts has already alienated him from his fellow workers, and during the strike they treat him with barely concealed hatred as they become increasingly disillusioned with the strike.

The disparity between Harry's masculine self-image as a militant labour hero, and his complete irrelevance, is an early reflection of the crisis in the union movement that would become clearer by the 1970s. In the 1920s and 1930s, with a Fordist manufacturing economy, a major depression, and limited labour protection laws, the trade union movement in the manufacturing sector had a crucial role in representing working class political identity. However, by the 1950s, with the changes in manufacturing brought about by the rise of post-industrialism, the older strategies of the union movement were no longer effective. With the decline in the number of blue-collar workers and the rise of white-collar supervisory and part-time workers, the trade unions could no longer count on being the representative voice of the working class while they focused entirely on an industrial blue-collar membership. Ironically, the failure to recognise these changes stemmed from the fact that the unions had achieved a high degree of legitimacy and power, just at the moment when they needed to broaden their constituency.

Buoyed by his position in the factory, Harry is unable fully to comprehend how his rhetoric and his internal understanding of his identity are at odds with the external reality of his environment. His failure to achieve any adequate or meaningful means of outward expression leads him to increasing self-abuse, through alcohol and humiliating himself with transvestites. His desire for transvestites can be read, in this context, as reflecting a crisis in his anachronistic masculine blue-collar identity, which constantly fails to garner him any respect; Harry's confused response sees him oscillating between demeaning himself with this desire and being abusive towards his wife. The way in which Harry's conflict of identity at work is sublimated into his self-hatred, and his

hatred of his family, is vividly illustrated early in the chapter when he resists his wife's attempts to make love:

He tried remembering how the boss looked last week when he told him off again – he smiled twistedly – that bastard, he cant shove me around. I tellim right to his face. Vice President. Shit. He know he cant fuck with me. Id have the whole plant shut down in 5 minutes – the caressing hand still there. He could control nothing. The fuckin bitch. Why cant she just leave me alone. Why don't she goaway somewhere with that fuckin kid. (107)

This is a key moment in the chapter, as it is the only point where there is any indication that Harry may understand that he is powerless. This recognition is fleeting at best, occurring as it does between his inflated estimation of his own importance as a shop steward and his abuse of his wife and son. Harry's failure to recognise his own impotency as a worker and a shop steward, his reliance on an outdated version of masculine blue-collar identity, and the way in which this leads him to alienate those around him, prefigures the self-destruction, and paralysis, of the union movement itself later in the century. By the 1970s, the movement was in crisis; it was proving ineffective in challenging anti-labour laws, and membership was in decline as it failed to draw in the service sector and part-time workers. Despite this, many union leaders refused to adapt, and instead maintained a stubborn posture of arrogance based on past successes. As Steven Lopez notes, in 1972, the AFL-CIO president George Meany responded to questions about the crisis with the comment, "I don't know, and I don't care" (3).

As the longest chapter, and the only one that offers a clear narrative structure and engages with the community as a whole, "Strike" dominates the novel. However, despite

the strike being the major event, the rest of the chapters connect to this storyline only tangentially. Whereas novels that depict labour struggles in the Fordist industrial society, such as Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* and Phillip Bonosky's *Burning Valley*, construct their overall narrative in and around the main industrial centre and labour disputes, the surrounding chapters and characters in *Last Exit* remain detached. As the union movement and manufacturing workers ceased to be the primary representatives of working class identity, the rest of the chapters in *Last Exit* prefigure the fragmentation of urban working class communities. In Selby's lower-working-class Brooklyn, with its high poverty rate, and lack of education and resources, the absence of any coherent class identity is felt keenly. The disintegration of working class identity in such urban centres was also compounded by demographic changes. Carlo Rotella, in his study of mid-twentieth century urban literature, points out how "a great sea change" took place with "the passing of the nineteenth century industrial city of downtown and neighbourhoods, and the visible, speedy emergence of the late twentieth century, postindustrial metropolis of suburbs and inner city" which, "almost invisible to many at mid-century, would develop into a full-blown 'urban crisis' by the mid-1960s" (4). Although occupying the historic centre of the Fordist economy, in the post-industrial society Selby's characters are now outsiders to the larger consumer culture. This marginal status, whereby they do not have the economic luxury to play happy families, or to temporarily ameliorate their alienation through commodity aesthetics, leads to violence and aggressiveness. Identity differences in this claustrophobic ghetto, particularly differences of gender and sexuality, are seen as threats and challenges, not pointing to potential class alliances.

Whereas Harry's identity finds its grounding in a nostalgic industrial, blue-collar tradition, Georgette fully embraces the "speedy" consumer culture. The second chapter, "The Queen is Dead", at first seems to recall the staccato tone of the opening chapter, but the absence of any sentence breaks throughout the opening paragraph, in which a more flowing and faster rhythm develops, suggests an altogether different cultural environment than that which surrounds the listless teenage gang at the diner. Unlike the gang and Harry, whose aggressive behaviour is symptomatic of low self-esteem, Georgette seems at ease with his identity: "Georgette was a HIP queer" who "didn't try to disguise or conceal it" (15). Georgette is comfortable dressed as a woman and is culturally sophisticated. He reads Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* and has a love of jazz, and it becomes clear that Georgette's cultural sophistication and confidence is a product of his ability to negotiate, and his responsiveness to, a wide range of cultural forms as opposed to a passive absorption of mass culture. In Georgette's ability to enter into complex cultural negotiations – but also in his failure to succeed – there are important implications for understanding the role of culture and class in the post-war period. While the 'speeding' culture offers the potential of innovation, such innovation is tempered and ultimately limited by the dominance of mass culture.

The behaviour of Vinnie and the gang towards Georgette and his friends – initially friendly, but ultimately violent – draws attention to the ways in which mass culture dissipates working class consciousness. The Frankfurt School's work on the culture industry is instructive here, particularly that of Herbert Marcuse in *Negations*, as in the novel there is a clear division of cultural choices which come into contact, and conflict, in this chapter. The cultural forms favoured by Georgette and his friends, such

as opera, avant-garde literature and jazz, can be read as examples of Marcuse's "affirmative culture". For Marcuse, affirmative culture, as the 'high' culture that emerged through the separation of culture and society in the bourgeois epoch, functions ambiguously under capitalism. As an "independent realm of value" which asserts a "better and more valuable world" this culture offers a critique of the false promises of capitalism (*Negations* 95). However, while affirmative culture can display "the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed", its separation from society under capitalism compromises this radical potential (200). In this, it becomes "a realm of apparent unity and apparent freedom" which is "constructed within culture", and "in which the antagonistic relations of existence" are "stabilized and pacified". As such, this culture both "affirms and conceals the new conditions of social life" (96). The primary means by which the radical aspects of affirmative culture are negated is its incorporation into, and consequent failure to challenge, the culture industry.

In *Last Exit*, mass culture is represented by the lifestyle of Vinnie and his gang. They are surrounded by the products of 1950s mass culture: hanging around the diner, eating burgers, listening to Rock 'n' Roll on the jukebox, and wearing their clothes in the latest style with "the collars of sportshirts turned up at the back, down and rolled in front" (3). Their frames of reference are always mass-cultural – the media, sport, movies and magazines. Vinnie carries around with him newspaper cuttings of an armed robber who had been in the same prison as him, and who had been shot by the police during a hold-up. We are told that "the glory of having known someone killed by the police during a stickup was the greatest event in his life" and was comparable to the memory of "a winning touchdown made at the end of the final game of the season" (19). When Harry

and Vinnie are throwing a knife at Georgette, it is described as a “scene resembling one in a grade B western”, (22) and Lee reminds Harry of “one of the show girls you see in some of the magazines” (36). Their complete immersion in mass culture dramatises the relationship that Marcuse identifies in *One Dimensional Man* between the products of mass culture and the way of life these products represent, which erases and absorbs affirmative culture. Marcuse argues that

the products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood ... it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life – much better than before – and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. (26)

One-dimensional culture plays an important role in negating the radical potential of affirmative culture by suppressing

the antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien, and transcendent elements in the higher culture by virtue of which it constituted another dimension of reality. This liquidation of two-dimensional culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the ‘cultural values’, but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale. (58)

In “The Queen Is Dead” the one-dimensional culture of Vinnie and his gang is juxtaposed against the cultural freedom of Georgette and his friends. Georgette is able to engage in free association of cultural expressions, shifting from listening to Charlie Parker (“the Bird”) to reading Poe’s “The Raven”. At one point early in the chapter, Vinnie is seen to occupy a place directly between mass culture and affirmative culture, as he feels “superior to the others because he knew Steve who had been killed by the bulls, and because Georgette was smart and could snow them under with words” (20). Yet his feeling of superiority through knowing Steve is false; he just happened to be in the same prison. His identification with Steve is sustained by the ownership of newspaper cuttings and the only lifestyle that this fleeting infamy offers is prison or death. In contrast, Vinnie’s friendship with Georgette does have the potential to liberate him from his environment through increased literacy and cultural awareness. However, as the chapter progresses, mass culture asserts its authority over affirmative culture – in the form of the Vinnie and his gang’s physical and sexual abuse of Georgette’s friends – and the chapter closes with Vinnie’s rejection of Georgette.

The ability of the culture industry to absorb, and nullify, affirmative culture is through the way in which it offers an ideologically and historically constructed lifestyle. Whereas affirmative culture is future oriented, and has the ability to critique the present and instil the desire for a better future, mass culture distorts the historical picture and offers a way of life that is presented as superior to any previous. Marcuse’s critical model elucidates the ideology of liberal consensus and has important implications for the development, or more precisely the redevelopment, of working class identity. The way of life offered by the supposedly classless consumer society of the 1950s, situated against



the class conflicts and economic hardships of the 1930s and 1940s, produced a confused response. While in relative terms, the conditions of the 1950s were more affluent than the 1930s, working class identity required an active engagement with the changing socio-economic conditions, particularly a recognition of the working class status and the lifestyles of white-collar workers in the service industries and lower management, and of women in part-time employment. However, the sheer scale and reach of the culture industry, and the institutionally embedded nature of the liberal consensus, negated these possibilities. This subjugation of working class consciousness is manifest in *Last Exit* through the extreme violence that the characters inflict on each other.

*Last Exit* suggests that the real potential of working class identity to reformulate a cultural and political challenge to the liberal consensus is the affirmative culture of Georgette, which transgresses both the extreme blue-collar masculinity of the community and the stultifying effects of mass culture. However, as the radical potential of affirmative culture becomes absorbed into the illusionary affirmation of the “speeding” mass culture, Georgette’s life, which becomes engulfed and overpowered by the mass culture of the culture industry, is in fact unable to go anywhere. Like the repetitive one-dimensional mass culture, his life spins “centrifugally, around stimulants, opiates, johns” (16). Like Harry’s, Georgette’s identity has no outward means of expression or broader reciprocation, and he is increasingly thrown back into himself, ameliorating the alienation through self-destructive addictions. However, the closing sentences of the chapter, where Georgette is lamenting Vinnie’s rejection, and is unsure whether Vinnie had sex with Lee, are ambiguous. The fact that Georgette is possibly dying of a self-inflicted overdose

symbolises a cultural asphyxiation, but his closing words display a sophisticated array of cultural references and linguistic play:

O, Im so cold. *La commèdia è finite*. No! NO! Vincennti. Yes, yes my darling. *Sì me chiamano Mimi*. Georgie-porgie puddin n pie. The Bird. Listen Vinnie. Bird. O yes my darling, I do I do. I love you. Love you. O Vinnie. Vincennti. Your mouth, lips, are so warm. d/Amore. O see how the stars soften the sky. Yes, like jewels. Oh Vinnie, im so cold. Come let us walk. *Sone Andati*. Yes my love, I hear him. Yes. He is blowing love. Love Vinnie ... blowing love ... no NO! O God no!!! Vinnie loves me. He loves me. It. Wasn/t.

Shit. (67)

Georgette's improvisation on culture and language, mixing high culture and popular culture, is redolent of jazz, and tentatively suggests a more hopeful ending. In this context the title of the chapter, "The Queen Is Dead", achieves more resonance if we think of what it suggests – "long live the Queen". Georgette's 'defeat' is tempered by the possibility, albeit remote at this point, of transcending one-dimensional mass culture through the realm of affirmative culture.

This radical potential of this final scene becomes more complex and challenging through Georgette's confluence of his earlier appreciation of Charlie Parker – "the strange rhythms of the Bird ripped to her, the piling patterns of sound all falling properly and articulately into place, and there was no wonderment at the Bird blowing love" (41) – and oral sex. Selby's focus on homosexuality in this working class community is extremely provocative, particularly for the 1950s. As scholars such as Robert J. Corber

in *Homosexuality in Cold War America* and John D'Emilio in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940 – 1970* have shown, the post-war years were complex times for sexual politics. Whereas urban centres during the twentieth century, particularly in New York and San Francisco, provided the opportunities for the development of gay communities, these co-existed extremely uneasily with the poor working class, and tensions were compounded during the 1950s by the Cold War ideology which conflated homosexuality and communism through the metaphor of disease. Working class males especially had the possibility of ameliorating their weakened economic status through an affirmation of patriotic masculinity. Vinnie's treatment of Georgette reflects the violent homophobia that exists in many working class communities. However, *Last Exit* also seems to be making a more complex point in that Vinnie's violence has to be placed in the context of his obvious affection, and possible love, for Georgette. This suggests that the violence is symptomatic of his own insecure identity, and need to affirm his masculinity in front of the rest of the gang.

By incorporating descriptions of explicit homosexual acts and 'high' culture, Selby makes a point about the potentially liberating role of culture within sexual politics, particularly in urban areas, which anticipates the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969. After the initial and unexpected resistance following a raid on the Stonewall Inn, a 'notorious' gay bar in Greenwich Village, the police called in the elite anti-riot squad, the Tactical Patrol Force, who were hardened through years of anti-Vietnam protests. However, as Martin Duberman describes it, the riot police "found themselves face to face with their worst nightmare: a chorus line of mocking queens, their arms clasped around each other,

kicking their heels in the air Rockettes-style and singing at the tops of their sardonic voices” (200). It was, as Duberman points out, “a deliciously witty, contemptuous counterpoint to the T P F’s brute force, a tactic that transformed an otherwise traditionally macho eye-for-an-eye combat and that provided at least the glimpse of a different and revelatory kind of consciousness” (201). This powerful affirmation of cultural and sexual difference in such a highly charged masculine situation was successful in initiating the modern gay rights movement. Importantly, many of the protesters were from working class communities where the culture of masculinity is at its most violent, but also, due to economic and social estrangement, at its most vulnerable. In *Last Exit*, Georgette, as a working class gay male, confronts and exposes Vinnie’s one-dimensional machismo, which reveals the importance of culture and sexuality in negotiating working class identity, both as a means of control and as a site of resistance.

Selby makes an even more trenchant and disturbing statement about the interconnections between working class poverty and sexuality through the character who gives her name to Chapter Four, “Tralala”. With no apparent family, no job, and no prospects, and as a single woman in this extremely masculine environment, her life is characterised by a listless, indifferent disconnection from those around her. Tralala suffers more than any other character in *Last Exit*, and this chapter contains very little in the way of subtle exploration of character or plot development. It opens with a description of Tralala as no more than a reified sexual object with no real feelings or emotions: “Tralala was 15 the first time she was laid. There was no real passion. Just diversion” (81). The emptiness of Tralala’s life is further emphasised by the flat, monotonous tone of the sentences, in complete contrast to the ‘speedy’ language of the

preceding chapters, and by the fact that she has no voice: “she didn’t say yes. She said nothing” (81).

In the decade of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*, Selby dramatises the economic and class aspects of female alienation. Outside of the domestic sphere of raising families and taking care of the home – the realm in which Friedan drew attention to middle-class alienation – the lower working class women whom Tralala represents have no value whatsoever. While she uses her sexuality to lure men who are then robbed by the gang at the diner, and is able to make a certain amount of money from casual, one-night stands, she displays no agency or self-awareness. For Tralala, “all she had to do was putout. It was kicks too. Sometimes. If not, so what? It made no difference. Lay on your back. Or bend over a garbage can. Better than working. And it kicks. For a while anyway. But time always passes” (82). The repetition of the fact that it “kicks”, in this context, only draws attention to the pathos of her indifference and disconnection, and implicitly prefigures her violent end. The claim that this is “better than working” is an equally ineffective claim, as it evokes parallels with the physical repetition, and alienation, of factory work. In fact, compared to workers at the factory, Tralala, as an unskilled, lower class woman, has even less control, and her only means of identity is as a sexual object.

As the chapter progresses Tralala becomes even more disconnected from the events in the novel, and it is impossible to place the events in any timeframe: “Time passed – months, maybe years, who knows, and the dress was gone and just a beatup skirt and sweater” (95). The relationship between time and experience has important implications for the alienation of characters in working class fiction. For the factory

workers in Swados' *On the Line*, and in Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, time on the assembly line acts in conjunction with their reification, and obscures the passing of the years. However, for Tralala, the passing of time has even more brutal consequences in that, rather than revealing a monotonous equilibrium, it reveals a catastrophic decline. At this point in the chapter, even her body has disappeared from the descriptions, and she has become no more than the clothes she wears. In one of the most tragic moments of the novel, Tralala, drunk in a bar, but seemingly only half-aware of her condition, attempts to reconnect to her surroundings in the only way she knows how. Having always been complimented on the size of her breasts, she tries to reassert her physical body: she "pulled her sweater up and bounced her tits on the palms of her hands and grinned and grinned and grinned" (98). But the result of this act, which is an extreme miscalculation of her situation and of her value, is the brutal gang rape, which leaves her violated and physically torn to pieces. The juxtaposition between the explicit descriptions and the brutality of the gang rape, and the bored indifference of those involved, presents a disturbing picture of a desensitised environment. Shut out of the economic benefits of the mass consumer society, and unrecognised as constituting a coherent class identity, they revert to a savage naturalistic destruction of the weaker members.

The final section of the novel, "Landsend", is a coda with its own specific form and interest. As each of the preceding chapters places an individual at the forefront of the narrative in order to depict their alienation from their surroundings, "Landsend" reverses this by obscuring the characters within the environment of the housing project. This shift in perspective has the effect of disorientating the reader as it introduces a large number of new characters, none of whom are clearly defined, and it reads much more like an

introduction than a conclusion. Rather than offering any resolution, “Landsend” compounds the sense of disconnection and alienation. There is high unemployment in the project; Irene is the only character who appears to have a job and this is only part-time in a local store, and it is left to the women to shoulder the burden of looking after the home and making ends meet. This poverty exacerbates gender divisions and produces dysfunctional families whose lives are characterised by verbal, emotional and physical violence. Vinnie and Mary’s frequent arguments are rendered in capital letters, and by the end of the chapter, their conversations are entirely in upper case. Mike, like Harry Black, is physically and emotionally abusive to his wife and child; Lucy and Luis hardly communicate at all; and Abraham lives a womanising life and ignores his wife. The only couple who appear to have any relative stable relationship and have aspirations are the African-American couple, Lucy and Louis, but these are limited to the distant possibility of moving to a Middle Income Project. The project is a violent and depressing place: a baby is found burnt and discarded in the trash, the elevators have excrement in them, and the women in the “Women’s Chorus” sections jeer and swear at their neighbours.

The families that live in the project fail to achieve any sense of community; they pass each other on the street, hear each other through the walls, but seem only dimly aware of each other’s presence. The personal indifferences of the project are further emphasised by the surprising fact that despite the racial and ethnic mix, apart from the occasional name-calling, there is no racial tension or antagonism. None of the characters in this section is portrayed in any depth, and the swift jumping from one to the next every few pages makes it difficult to follow – a difficulty compounded by Selby’s habit of deliberately using the same first names for different characters throughout the novel,

particularly Lucie, Harry and Vinnie, in a further undermining of individual agency and identity.

The absence of closure to the novel in this final section (just a catalogue of depressing sketches) is an important statement. As an indictment of the social and economic situation of these working class characters, the novel offers no solutions, but instead focuses on dramatising the problems. Underlying the narrative is a sophisticated political consciousness that anticipates later critical and theoretical developments in class identity and mass culture. There is a subtle awareness of the important, and contradictory, role of culture in society, specifically the contradictory ways that culture can perpetuate alienation, whilst at the same time offering a means of challenging the dehumanising and deterministic effects of capitalism. In this respect, *Last Exit* is a novel that can be situated within post-1945 critical work on class politics and culture. In its critique of the alienating effects of the mass culture of post-industrial society, and in its searching out of ways to reconnect culture to the social reality of working class poverty and alienation, *Last Exit* offers an imaginative contribution to the theoretical transition between the Frankfurt School and the critical postmodernism of such theorists as Fredric Jameson. In the context of the hegemonic literary and cultural paradigms of the post-war period it is easy to see why *Last Exit*, with its brutal and nihilistic subject matter, is considered as an example of “hallucinatory naturalism” and on the margins of the major literary movements. However, to think about *Last Exit* in the context of class reveals a novel that displays a complex understanding of the relationship between social reality and literary form, beyond the limiting post-war categorisations of social realism and naturalism. In its refusal to offer any easy resolution or comfortable aesthetic respite,



*Last Exit*, like many working class post-war novels, confronts the challenges in redeveloping working class identity and culture beyond the closing of the factory gates of the Fordist era.

## Conclusion

### Class, Theory and the Working Class Novel

One of the major theoretical concerns of this study involves a negotiation of the ambiguous nature of class as it operates in real life *and* in its role as a critical concept. Furthermore, the specific political character of critical discourses in the post-war period has further complicated the tension between the two. E. P. Thompson's explication, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, of the historical formation of class identity is crucial in understanding the relationships between class and culture. For Thompson, it is important to distinguish between the actuality of lived experience and cultural expression, both in the present moment and over historical time, but also to understand that a critical approach that utilises class, which is to a certain extent an abstract definition, must emerge *from* lived experiences and cultural expression. The manner in which this emerges is, of course, one of constant negotiation, as previous definitions and understandings of class become part of historical experience, while also contributing to a body of theoretical and critical philosophies. However, these definitions can never be definitive, as new economic, political, social and cultural developments continually reshape class identity (8-11). Fiction, particularly the novel, plays an invaluable role in negotiating the complexities of class identity and expression. The ability of the novel to explore the spaces between material and imaginative realities and experiences enables it to function both as a critique of existing conditions and as a means of cultural expression and exploration of working class identity. As Richard Hoggart writes in *The Uses of Literacy*, it is "novels, after all, that may bring us really close to the quality of working

class life". For Hoggart, the novel offers more than just a mimetic surface reflection of life, it is able to probe the indeterminate and contradictory mores and conventions of working class behaviour and beliefs: "clearly we have to try to see beyond the habits to what the habits stand for, to see through the statements to what the statements really mean (which may be the opposite of the statements themselves), to detect the differing pressures of emotion behind idiomatic phrases and ritualistic observances" (16-17).

Thompson's theoretical work also draws attention to two important and difficult issues in assessing working class novels, which have been a central concern of this study. The first is an awareness of the implications of imposing the category of class on to cultural work. While it is possible to utilise a sociological or economic definition of the working class as an empirical basis for study, this should not be confused, or conflated, with an assumption of how cultural work produced by this class *should* be constructed, or define the type of experiences that these people have or need to write about. The second issue emerges from Thompson's observation that if we stop history at any moment then all we see is a multitude of experiences. Therefore, a cultural period as narrow as a decade has to be grasped synchronically from one perspective – as these experiences are expressed, possibly chaotically, within culture – and diachronically from another – as part of a broader cultural development *from* which theoretical conclusions on class development can be reached. In this context, it is worth repeating Janet Zandy's argument that "a working-class text centres the lived, material experiences of working class people", and as such it is important to remember that "contradictory voices in working-class texts are as prevalent as collective ones" (Hapke 5). Bearing this in mind it is crucial not to reduce a working class novel to aspects of the revolutionary and

teleological class struggle, or to create a hierarchy of 'authentic' working class texts. Moreover, any cultural analysis is a critical interpretation, or intervention, that participates in the class process itself. Working class experience, whether of the writer, a character in a novel, or within a fictional narrative, always relates ambiguously to any collective identity.

The tensions between individual experience and collective experience, and those between lived experience and historical experience, are central to a thorough understanding of working class culture. However, they also present the most pressing difficulties, as they involve a need to move beyond the critical paradigms of traditional Marxism *and* the dominant discourse of consensus that emerged during the 1950s. Moreover, the reification of the terms 'Marxism' and 'working class' that occurred during the post-war period compound the difficulties within Marxist theory itself, often forcing Marxism into arguments not of its own choosing, particularly the need to constantly justify the continued relevance of Marx whenever working class issues are raised. The 1950s, then, marked a crucial moment in the development of working class culture, or more precisely, a moment when this culture was under intense pressure just as political, societal and economic changes presaged the need for a rethinking and a re-articulation of American working class identity. The perception that there was very little working class literature being written or published – which is sustained by the majority of critical or historical surveys of the period – is symptomatic of the long-term influence of the post-war critical discourse. However, as I have argued, this perception is in marked contrast to the actual number of novels written during this period that engage with working class issues.

As this study has shown, the ideology of consensus rested on a belief in the existence of an 'autonomous' individual, so that the classless society was predicated upon the voluntary association of free individuals whose differences could be attributed to personal choice. This idea of individualism is sustained by the belief in American exceptionalism and, to a certain extent, pragmatism, which is believed to differ in fundamental ways from European notions of the relationship between the individual and the state. However, this belief elides the essential commonalities between American individualism and the Enlightenment view of individual identity, which was constructed out of middle class notions of identity. The emerging 'individual' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for instance, was always defined in contrast to the masses, as exemplified by Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). For Arnold, the modern individual could only be developed through the intervention of a cultured elite, such as Coleridge's 'clerisy' (which of course included Arnold), whose responsibility was to educate and civilise both the masses and the middle class on their appropriate behaviour. In a concomitant development, the rise of the novel, with its random endless possibilities, was equally predicated on the idea of the modern individual, and the form of the novel was prescribed by bourgeois norms, in terms of acceptable narrative structures and characters, as well as the social structure determining who could actually write and be published.

There are close parallels between the class-based European Enlightenment construction of the individual and the hegemonic intellectual and cultural discourses of the post-war years. In the 1950s the individual was defined in opposition to a collective mass, whether historically against the unemployed masses of the 1930s, the Trade Unions

or the Communist Party (and ultimately the masses of totalitarianism), or contemporaneously against the amorphous and ambiguous mass society. As in England in the nineteenth century, the hegemonic intellectual cultural elite in the United States in the 1950s employed the ideal of individualism as a legitimising concept in their self-assigned role as the guardians of the 'health' of the nation. The New York intellectuals' elevation to positions in the expanding academy, and their preoccupation with the novel as the cultural form which most effectively engages with society, is not far removed from the ideological thinking of Arnold and Coleridge.

Faced with this pervasive ideology of individualism, any class-based cultural analysis is deemed anti-individualist and anti-democratic and is reduced to a historical narrative, essentially Marxism or socialism (the difference between them somewhat elided), that is at odds with the individualism of the post-war consensus. While on the surface such an opposition between Marxism and American capitalist democracy, configured through the opposition between class and individualism, appears self-evident, it is possible to discern similarities between the two narratives. While Marxism and capitalism are competing belief systems, they essentially share the same Hegelian vision of history as progress, and the conviction that *at some point* 'history' is concluded, and that each moment before this point is incomplete. It was this shared vision of historical completion, combined with the exacerbation of their differences through the Cold War discourse of anti-communism, which was utilised most effectively by the dominant ideology of consensus and individualism, through critics such as Daniel Bell and the New York intellectuals, who as former leftists appropriated many Marxist strategies. Consensus ideology constructed a historical narrative that incorporated many of the

major tenets of Marxism. Consensus intellectuals did not deny the existence of classes and class conflict in the past, but reconfigured these through a different interpretation: one that argued that class conflict had been resolved. Historical class differences were not class conflict *per se*, but exemplified the way in which American society was able to work through and overcome social and economic disparities through the essential genius of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny; the American Dream of individual success through the ability to overcome hardship is embedded within the narrative of American history. By absorbing the shared characteristics of Marxism and capitalism consensus ideology was able to universalise its position by simultaneously externalising and internalising any competing narrative.

The dominance of consensus ideology in the post-war period, and the way it has continued to pervade cultural thought, presents problems for working class studies in explicating the complex and ambiguous relationship between class identity and individual identity in an advanced capitalist society, without having constantly to defend the perceived reductionism of Marxism. A theoretical means of overcoming these difficulties, and one which has informed this study, is presented by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* in which a Marxist class-based critique is offered through a deconstruction of bourgeois individualism. While the bourgeois 'individual' exists primarily as a concept and as a desire, it is for Jameson in many ways an admirable goal, and he suggests that it is important to treat seriously the utopian goals of both ruling class and subordinate classes: "all class consciousness of whatever type is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collectivity". For Jameson, "even hegemonic or ruling-class culture and ideology are Utopian, not in spite of their instrumental function to secure and

perpetuate class privilege and power, but rather precisely because that function is also in and of itself the affirmation of collective solidarity” (281). Jameson’s proposal is to combine a Marxist critique of class oppression (a “Marxist negative hermeneutic”), with a re-reading of the humanistic Enlightenment project (a “positive hermeneutic”):

This is a unified perspective and not the juxtaposition of two options or analytical alternatives: neither is satisfactory in itself. The Marxian ‘negative hermeneutic’, indeed, practised in isolation, fully justifies Sahlin’s complaints about the ‘mechanical’ or purely instrumental nature of certain Marxian cultural analyses; while the Utopian or ‘positive hermeneutic’, practised in similar isolation as it is in Frye’s doctrine of the collective origins of art, relaxes into the religious or the theological, the edifying and moralistic, if it is not informed by a sense of the class dynamics of social life and cultural production. (282)

This model is extremely useful for approaching the type of analysis necessary for understanding working class culture, in which the tensions between individual identity and collective identity are assessed in conjunction with the tensions between quotidian experience and historical experience:

If the Mannheimian overtones of this dual perspective – ideology and Utopia – remain active enough to offer communicational noise and conceptual interference, then alternative formulations may be proposed, in which an instrumental analysis is coordinated with a *collective-associational* or *communal* reading of culture, or in which a *functional* method for describing cultural texts is articulated with an *anticipatory* one. (286)



This model, of course, mirrors almost precisely the class identity formation posited by Thompson, but with a heightened awareness of the problems attending to any totalising theoretical structure. This approach is particularly useful for a cultural analysis of the post-war years as it enables an affirmation of working class culture to be incorporated with a critique of the complicity of the cultural elite in marginalising working class culture in order to sustain their own ideology. Furthermore it avoids the necessity to constantly offer an absolute ‘defence’ of Marx; a defence which, on its own, risks confirming the allegedly marginal and declining status of working class culture.

### **Class and the Post-war Novel**

These ideological and philosophical tensions between the concepts of individualism and class identity strongly influenced the critical understanding of the novel in the post-war years. The pervasive hegemonic ideology of a middle class individualism fed into a demarcation between a ‘literary’ fiction (“moral realism”) concerned with the issues of ‘individual’ identity, and genre fiction, which included ‘popular’ fiction, and works with specific sociological, regional, or racial concerns. Many working class writers found their work categorised as genre fiction, or like Chester Himes discovered that writing popular genre fiction was the most effective (or only) way to get their work published. This categorisation of genres specifically reflected the constituent parts, or the imagined parts, of working class identity, either by issue – crime, violence, romance (especially when this involved a reconciliation of the family, or the acquisition of domestic and economic stability) – or by individual identity markers such as region, race, ethnicity, or gender. Even those novels that engaged explicitly with

working class politics, such as Chester Himes' early novels, Angusander Saxton's *The Great Midland* (1948), Lloyd Brown's *Iron City* (1951), and Phillip Bonosky's *Burning Valley* (1953), were assigned to a 'genre' of radical fiction. As such, they attracted criticism that focused entirely on their radical Marxist politics, ignored their literary qualities, and which neglected to understand their contribution to the exploration of the complexity of working class identity. The result, as Laura Hapke points out, was that "these writers formed part of a literary underground of silenced, culturally invisible proletarian writers" (265). Implicit in the construction of genres was a conflation of form and content by many post-war critics. The literary qualities, and the broader significances, of the writers in this study, Harriette Arnow, Harvey Swados, Chester Himes, and Hubert Selby, were compromised by the critics' perception of their works as genre fiction. Harriette Arnow is regarded as a 'female' writer from Kentucky, despite the fact that *The Dollmaker* is set predominantly in Detroit and engages as much with factory and union politics as Gertie's home life. The 1972 Avon Books edition of *The Dollmaker* is clearly marketed as a romance novel ("An Epic Story of Unique Personal Triumph") with a picture of a young, petite, blonde woman on the cover. This fits neatly with the 1983 film version starring Jane Fonda as an unlikely Gertie (in the novel Gertie is big, awkward, clumsy and inarticulate), where the ending of the novel is changed into an 'uplifting' family reunion, and they all travel back to Kentucky happier and wiser. A gritty, heartbreaking, violent novel of mid-twentieth century working class life is transformed into a film that the *Time Out* film guide describes as "sentimental nonsense". Southern working class writers, particularly women, have been consistently marginalised through the categories of gender and region. For example, Carson McCullers and

Flannery O'Connor are primarily viewed through the prism of Southern Gothic and seen to be concerned with existential themes of good and evil, while their engagement with class is ignored. Contemporary working class southern writers suffer from the same critical distancing. Again, this is especially true of women writers, such as Bobby Ann Mason, Dorothy Allison, or Paula Glover, as they become known for a "white trash" or "Hick Chic" aesthetic, or they attract attention merely because of the writer's gender and sexuality. The actual contributions of working class Southern writers, and their connections to working class writers around the country (which reflect the economic and social interconnections), are diffused by the foregrounding of cultural (which is to say regional) differences, whereby racial, ethnic, and gender antagonisms operate across the canvas of a mythical, Gothic and carnivalesque South.

As we saw in Chapter Five, Chester Himes suffered from similar neglect. As an African American writer exploring issues of race, work and gender from a working class perspective, Himes challenged the middle class assumptions underlying liberal discourses on individualism and the novel. As such, his earlier novels became pigeonholed as 'protest' and his later detective fiction as 'pulp' crime fiction, neither of which attends to the commonalities between the two in terms of Himes' skill at utilising a variety of literary forms, and his explorations of the diversity of working class life. Liberal assumptions about race had an even more devastating affect on working class African American women writers, so that Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953) and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1958) were ignored for many years, and still receive little attention in major surveys of American literature and appear only on a small number of university courses.

The contrasting fates of Harvey Swados and Hubert Selby are indicative of the way in which the post-war liberal dichotomy between (working) class and (implicitly middle class) individualism impacted on the critical reception of novels and hindered the recognition of the diversity of working class literary culture. Swados' minimalist style and attention to the minutiae of factory life in *On the Line* led to the liberal criticism that the novel was mired in naturalism and the class politics of the 1930s, and that its form and subject matter were inadequate to effectively engage with the post-war conditions. In contrast, Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* garnered relatively positive critical responses that were attentive to his experimental writing style and his unflinching portrayal of violence and sex. However, as we saw in Chapter Six, such critical praise was ambiguous as Selby subsequently became a footnote in the larger literary culture, noted as a "cult" writer, producing what Morris Dickstein calls "underground" writing and placed alongside such writers as John Rechy (73). Both Swados and Selby became marginalised through their failure to address what the liberal establishment felt were the important 'universal' issues of the post-war period, and through the respective categorisations of labour novel and "cult" novel, the similarities between Swados and Selby in terms of their subject matter have been ignored. In fact, all the writers in this study share common concerns about the effects of the emergence of post-industrialism on working class communities, and are attentive to a class identity that comprises both shared and individual experiences. In this respect, these novels can also be read alongside many novels on the new white-collar class in the post-war period, such as Sloan Wilson's *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, (1960), Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), where this

new class (Daniel Bell's *salariat*) attempt to negotiate a superficial middle class existence replete with economic and social alienation.

There were major literary challenges to the liberal consensus and middle class individualism in the 1950s, most notably the Beat writers and the early postmodern (or "dark humor") work of such writers as John Barth, Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon. However, the radicalism in both these movements was tempered by the pervasiveness of the ideology of individualism, in which the potential for improvisation could become repetition, and the myth of the frontier collapsed back on to the internalised individual, resulting in an ambiguous relationship between these writers and the dominant culture. This tension can be read symptomatically in two important novels of the 1950s that engage with one of the enduring myths of American society: the lure of the open road. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) displays precisely this tension in which restlessness, searching and movement can dissolve into repetition, exhaustion and alienation, and where the stream of consciousness prose style veers close to narcissism. Andrew Ross has identified how the radicalism of the Beat writers had an uncertain relationship to the society they were aiming to critique, pointing out that:

The Beats' holy poverty had little to do with conditions in the ghetto; it was a response to a perceived middle-class 'poverty of spirit which the rites of the 'angel-headed hipster' were designed to exorcize. The purgatorial journeys of Beat heroes ... all called attention to the sinful consumerism of the new middle classes .... Their personal itinerary – to be on the road, and burning like 'fabulous yellow roman candles' – recalled the code of aristocratic self-extinction espoused by *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes. (86)

While the Beat writers did have a political consciousness, attacking middle class success that they saw as not only worthless but destructive, they nonetheless shared the hegemonic belief in the importance of individualism. Although they posited an alternative individualism to the dominant paradigm, as we saw in the theoretical discussion above the ideology of the liberal consensus was articulated in such a way that it could absorb most criticism. In fact, accepting critiques of the paucity of individual identity in the post-war period was central to the liberals' own ideology. The genius of consensus was that it presented itself as a flexible culture that welcomed (certain) alternative viewpoints, as these sustained the impression of 'freedom' and obfuscated the liberals' underlying middle class ideology.

An alternative interpretation of the myth of the open road is presented in John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958). In a satire on the popularity of therapeutic solutions in the 1950s, the central character, Jacob Horner, undergoes treatment at the Remobilization Farm. Here, the solution offered by the doctor to Jacob's apathy is an internalised version of the desire to take to the road, a form of dramaturgy called Mythotherapy. But this almost existential reinvention of the self, as a way to dramatise his own identity, only leaves Jacob cynical, indifferent and withdrawn, reduced to finding the meaning of his existence in absurdly pedantic distinctions between descriptive and prescriptive grammar.

The existential fate of many characters in Beat and postmodern fiction, such as Jacob, and Kerouac's Dean Moriarty, suggests the *limits* of any substantial challenge to the liberal consensus. It appears that by the end of the 1950s, the only narrative means of overcoming the stasis produced by a culture that was simultaneously accelerating *and*

claustrophobic, in which the protagonists ended up back home, underground, mired in linguistic game-play, or in therapy, was a third option – to leave the country altogether like the narrator of Clancy Sigal’s *Going Away* (1961). In this semi-autobiographical novel, the central character, a former trade union activist turned Hollywood agent, makes a final farewell drive across the country in 1956 before leaving for England. Visiting old friends, the majority of whom had been involved in leftist politics and the unions, the narrator/Sigal (the distinction is deliberately blurred) is trying to understand what has happened to his radicalism and to come to terms with a politics and culture in the 1950s that no longer makes sense to him. By the end of the journey, he feels disconnected from his country:

I had to leave. I had outlived my time, had lived too faithfully according to the code of my generation. A new way of life was appearing in America I was no longer equipped to understand, new qualities I was not equipped to see .... I belonged nowhere. I was on the outside .... I had become like an old man before the age of thirty, scanning anxiously among the new generation for the peculiar virtues of my own. (511)

As a socialist, Sigal, even at the age of 30, feels the dramatic shifts in political culture in mid-century, but in carrying out his journey and writing his book, it is not the absence of radicalism *per se* that bothers him, but fundamental changes in the culture. He admits that the impulse to write the novel is embedded in a 1930s tradition; he had wanted “to write a true book of the working-class hero”, but at the close he realises that:

Every time I had followed in my parents’ footsteps, had actually done that which I was bred to do, gone into the factory, spoken from the platform, lived and eaten

and hoboed with working people, I had become afflicted and appalled with the crudity and meanness of their lives. I wanted to save them, not live among them. Once I left my class I was rootless and superficial. What I had learned ... I had learned this. That the deepest evil consisted not of corrupting a vision of life but of failing to understand. (512)

The narrator/Sigal's predicament encapsulates the state of working class radicalism in the 1950s. His desire to work on behalf of the working class is frustrated by the cleavage between working class life and the hegemonic national political and cultural order. He finds that his fellow radicals have now joined the new white-collar class, dropped out entirely, or are officials in a union movement that is in cooperation with management. His understanding, and experience, of working class life can find little resonance with the broader culture that denies, or ignores, economic inequality, and shows little concern over the paucity of any critical and cultural engagement. In a comment that reflects the way in which the intellectual culture of the 1950s has become divorced from the realities of working class life, the narrator finds himself as a writer "rootless and superficial", and significantly, *Going Away* was written in England, the only place where Sigal could find a suitably engaged cultural environment.

In *The End of Ideology*, Daniel Bell makes a revealing statement on 1950s culture when he argues that the "paradox is that whatever is deemed radical in culture is quickly accepted, and whatever calls itself avant-garde, be it abstract expressionism or Beatnik poetry, is quickly acclaimed" (310). However, what Bell fails to mention is that only *certain* forms of radical culture are accepted, ones that either support the primacy of individualism or that can be *interpreted* as such. The critical paradigms established by



the liberal elite demarcated the nature of what was radical, and the extent to which any radical challenge was allowed to operate. It is the contention of this study that the working class novel actively, and successfully, adapted to the conditions of the post-war period. However, the recognition of this fact involves more than reclaiming of certain 'authentic' radical working class writers – those whose work is more overtly political – as this risks perpetuating the idea that working class literature is part of a peripheral culture. What is required is a re-thinking of the terms of analysis, beyond the post-war ideological divisions between individualism and class, which recognises the complexities of working class identity.

The working class novel, as a dramatisation of the contradictory, elusive, and politically ambiguous experiences of working people, is a powerful presence in late twentieth century American literature, and encompasses a diverse range of styles, regions and identities. The task is not just to recognise certain working class writers and 'rescue' them from oblivion, but to effect a shift in perception that recognises the existence of class in the United States, and that working class identity is dynamic and heterogeneous, incorporating collective *and* individual experiences. The result will not just be the elevation of a number of 'forgotten' writers, but a major re-thinking of post-war American literature.

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