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Radicalism in Literature:
Proletarian Fiction of the 1930s

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The power and need to create, over and beyond reproduction is native in both women and men. Where the gifted among women (and men) have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity, it is because of circumstances, inner or outer, which oppose the needs of creation.

--Tillie Olsen (Silences)
Introduction

In a study of working class literature from the 1930s, I would contend that the most radical work was produced primarily by female writers. For the most part, this radicalism owed to the subordination and the victimization of women in society. Since all of the writers that were studied (Tillie Olsen, Meridel LeSueur, Fielding Burke, Agnes Smedley, Erskine Caldwell, Michael Gold, Jack Conroy, and Floyd Dell) were at least involved with, if not members of, the Communist Party, this makes a fascinating study into the power of a philosophy of government on the individual. Not only was the individual suppressed to a certain degree in the CP-USA in regards to his/her creativity, but women were particularly oppressed because they were not "allowed" to concern themselves with women's issues over the concerns for the "revolution." During the 1930s, The Communist Party reached its highest membership ever in the United States; in 1930, the CP-USA claimed only 7,500 members whereas in 1939, it reached a membership of 75,000.[1] Although the power of the Communist Party could never be considered great in the U.S., the CP-USA did exert a significant influence on American culture during the 1930s. The Communist Party particularly influenced working-class literature; it laid important foundations for the proletarian novel, by strengthening and attempting to define its traditions. Although the proletarian tradition was limited, and, at times, restricted the creativity and productivity of its writers, the Party created an important network for working-class writers. By virtue of their sex, however, women were particularly restricted as they fell victim to sexism within the movement as well as to the subordination of their specific and special concerns.
First, it is important to attempt to define "proletarian literature." The meaning of this term remained a subject of tremendous debate throughout the thirties and was never actually resolved. For the purposes of this paper, the term "proletarian writer" can be defined as one who writes about working-class experiences and has some direct identification with the working class. Not all of the writers who are being examined were from working-class families. If a particular writer did not come from an actual working-class background, then he/she must have had special sympathies for the working-class experience and this must be clearly evident in the novel. All of the novels discussed have, for their protagonists, members of the working-class.

In this paper, a "spectrum" of radical fiction will be presented. In The Radical Novel in the United States, Walter Rideout defines a radical novel as "one which demonstrates, either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to human suffering imposed by some socio-economic system and advocates that the system be fundamentally changed."[2] To deem one novel to be more radical than another is to examine that novel's orientation to society and the degree to which the author wishes the society in which he/she lives be changed. Through the proletarian novels that will be presented, women writers, typically, can be seen as more radical than the men because of their clearly radical statements for and allusions to the destruction of not only the existing economic order (which is the primary concern of the male writers), but also the existing social order, especially in regard to issues of dispute between the sexes. Surprisingly, however, the "spectrum"
that will be presented begins and ends with a female writer. The most radical is Agnes Smedley, with Daughter of Earth, and the least radical is Fielding Burke, with Call Home the Heart.
Women and the Communist Party

The Communist Party defined a very paradoxical role for female members of the Party. In her study of Tillie Olsen, Deborah Rosenfelt discovered that:

.... for a woman in the thirties, the Left was a profoundly masculinist world in many of its human relationships, in the orientation of its literature, and even in the language used to articulate its cultural criticism; simultaneously, the Left gave serious attention to women’s issues, valued women's contributions to public as well as to private life and generated an important body of theory on the Woman Question.[3]

For progressive action in the thirties, the Communist Party was an important catalyst; the formation of a separate movement was never contemplated. In comparison with the New Left of the 1960s, the CP of the 1930s provided "a far more sympathetic climate for the aspirations of women."[4] Both men and women were drawn to the Party in response to the economic devastation of the Depression; while America seemed to fall apart, the new Soviet experiment seemed vital and alive.

During the first half of the 1930s the CP concentrated on industrial workers and the unemployed. The main organizing thrust "was the asserted need to replace the ailing capitalist system with Soviet-style socialism."[5] During the second half of the decade, this policy of the CP underwent a dramatic change. In response to the rising strength of Fascism, which was seen as the greatest threat to socialism, the Communists sought alliances with liberal organizations that were antifascist. This period in American Communist activity (1935-39) "witnessed perhaps the CP’s broadest participation in movements of concern
to women, and in American reform in general"[6]; it was called
the Popular Front of the CP-USA. In 1939, this period of American
Communism ended, as well as the heyday of American Communism
in general, with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression
pact, and the subsequent feeling of betrayal among those who
opposed Hitler as the worst danger of the era.

Women made up a significant part of the CP in the
1930s. By the end of the decade, women made up between thirty
and forty percent of the CP-USA membership.[7] Furthermore,
some of these women did rise in the Communist hierarchy. Most,
however, were usually more concerned with the issues of socialism
than feminism although they had "some consciousness of women's
special oppression."[8] Female leaders usually recognized
prejudice in the CP-USA. Mother Bloor, probably the most widely
known Communist woman in the 1930s, wrote in 1940:

\[\text{I do not minimize what our Party has done toward bringing about true equality, admitting no discrimination of race, color, or creed in our ranks. But I have often felt that there has been some hesitancy in giving women full responsibility with men....}[9]\]

Many men who were members of the CP-USA held fairly traditional attitudes about women's proper roles. Within the Communist Party, there were many "unliberated" marriages where women were expected to "host meetings, put up unexpected guests, and take care of the house."[10]

Both men and women experienced the "difficulties of devoting one's whole life to the revolution while at the same time maintaining personal commitments...."[11] In the case of domestic
responsibilities, however, the burden as usual fell completely on the woman. Collective responsibility for childrearing, either between parents or by the community, was never contemplated. Many women even had abortions if a baby would interfere with their own or their husband's activist work. On the other hand, the Communist Party was one of the few agencies that encouraged public discussions of women's issues during the thirties.[12] Robert Schaffer, in his "Women and the Communist Party, U.S.A.," concluded: "Despite its important weaknesses, the CP's work among women in the 1930's was sufficiently extensive, consistent, and theoretically valuable to be considered an important part of the struggle for women's liberation in the United States."[13]

The primary voice in raising women's issues in the 1930s was the Women's Commission of the Communist Party, U.S.A. This commission published two magazines, Working Woman and Woman Today. Both were staffed and written almost entirely by women. The main CP newspaper, The Daily Worker, even had a woman's column.[14]

In literature, however, the Communist Party, U.S.A. limited the creativity and productivity of writers who were involved with the movement, especially in regard to female writers. The most prominent voice in establishing a genre of proletarian literature was Michael Gold. His experiences as a child on the Lower East Side of New York City led him to become a Communist. His semi-autobiographical Jews Without Money (to be discussed later) was published in 1930. In 1922, he became one of the three editors of The Liberator and in 1928, he became the editor of New Masses. Gold began to deal with the problem of proletarian
art in the early 1920s. In 1921, his article "Towards Proletarian Art" appeared in The Liberator. Finally, in 1930, Gold outlined a new form of literature in New Masses, "Proletarian Realism":

It would deal with working class characters and their experiences; it would describe precisely the technical skill of their work; it would always embody a social theme and be filled, not with pessimism, but with "revolutionary elan"; it would do all this in swift, unadorned language and without resort to melodrama, for "life itself is the supreme melodrama."[15]

During the 1930s, debate raged among literary activists over what would classify a work of fiction as a "proletarian novel." In 1934, E.A. Schachner, who wrote "Revolutionary Literature in the United States Today," defined revolutionary literature as that which "consciously supports the movement for the revolutionary destruction of capitalism." Proletarian fiction was defined as that which "merely reflects the life of any typical cross section of the proletariat and need not be more revolutionary than the proletariat itself at the time the novel is written."[16] During the American Writer’s Congress of 1935, the debate continued. From that Congress, from book reviews, and from critical articles written at that time, the notion that the proletarian novel was one that was written from a Marxist viewpoint evolved and solidified:

And just as literature during the years of capitalist reflected bourgeois values, had attempted, while reassuring the middle classes, to disarm the worker and alienate him from his class, so the new literature would bring the worker to class-consciousness, steal him for the coming revolution, prepare him for the role he would play in the next stage of history.[17]
In a 1985 article in the *New York Times*, Robert S. McElvaine (Workers in Fiction: Locked Out") declares that "most of the 'proletarian' fiction of the 30's, written to serve political rather than artistic purposes, is not worth discussing."[18] McElvaine notes one exception, however, and that is *The Disinherited* by Jack Conroy because of Conroy's exceptional description of industrial labor.

It is this kind of thinking that "locked out" female writers of the 1930s. Of the three novels analyzed here and written in the thirties (*Smedley's Daughter of Earth* was published in 1929), only one was published in the 1930s--Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart*. *Yonnondio* (Tillie Olsen) was not published until the 1970s. In the 1930s, *Yonnondio* remained unfinished because of Olsen's own conflict between the importance of her women's concerns versus the equally important concerns for revolution. She was so involved with and influenced by the Communist Party that she did not have the freedom to express herself as she could have. Meridel LeSueur was not able to publish much during the decade because she was considered "too pessimistic" and too heavily concerned with feminist issues. Fielding Burke's protagonist, however, in *Call Home the Heart* sacrifices her feminist and Marxist goals in the end and returns to her husband, whom she had left. The women who did not publish, too, emphasized the needs of children instead of placing the emphasizing on the politics of the industrial labor force.

All in all, "proletarian realism" was far too limited to allow for the expression of a full range of working-class experience in fiction. Ideologues of the proletarian type
emphasized that "art was to be a weapon in the class struggle."[19] Although the premise of proletarian realism held that fiction "should show the sufferings and struggles and essential dignity of working-class people under capitalism and allow readers to see the details of their lives and work," in actuality, not all aspects of the working class experience were allowed to be freely expressed--art was not to be a weapon in the struggle for female liberation or for genuine female expression. In silencing these women, the CP leaders saw to it that the more dynamic of working-class literature was silenced as well. Tillie Olsen and Meridel LeSueur both wrote novels that were not only more dynamic, but also far more reaching in their scope.
The Radicalism of Daughter of Earth

Although the publication date of Daughter of Earth (1929) only slightly precedes the appearance of the other novels of this essay (except Floyd Dell's Moon-Calf), this novel is strikingly different. Agnes Smedley seems to be beyond the term "radical"; many of Smedley's ideas would even be labelled as ultra-radical today. Significantly, Daughter of Earth was published before the Crash and therefore was not subject to the scrutiny of the Communist Party, like many of the proletarian novels of the 1930s. In Daughter of Earth, Smedley, through the use of this semi-autobiographical novel, asserts her individuality over her sex and politics. In defining a progression of radical novels, I believe beginning with Smedley is important since she presents ideas most inconsistent with the norms of society in relation to the other novels that I have studied. Also, she was not subject to the repression of the Communist Party, U.S.A., like the other female authors in this essay were, and thus was able to be published in spite of her very radical ideas.

Agnes Smedley was born in 1892 in Missouri. Her early life was spent in rural poverty; the family later moved to Colorado where they lived in the squalor of a mining town. Her father was uneducated and drank heavily. When Agnes was sixteen, her mother died from overwork. Agnes, like Marie in Daughter of Earth, did not want to fall into the same trap as her mother. She left home, worked at odd jobs in the Southwest, and went to Tempe Normal School in Arizona for a year. In 1912, Smedley contracted an "egalitarian marriage," but the
marriage eventually ended in divorce.

Around 1917, Smedley began her involvement with the Indian Freedom Movement. During this time she also "wrote in support of socialist and feminist causes, established birth control clinics, and studied Asian history and Marxism."[1] In the 1920s, Smedley's involvement with revolutionary Virendranath Chattopadhyaya led her to a nervous breakdown. She wrote Daughter of Earth "in an attempt to reorient her life."[2] In 1928, Smedley went to China and dedicated the rest of her life to the Chinese revolutionary movement.

In the 1920s, Agnes Smedley was writing in a politically repressive America. Socialism had been severely disabled by the Red Scare of 1919. As the United States moved out of World War I and began a period of isolationism, radical politics were placed in an awkward position. Feminism had lost its steam after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment as feminists split into several groups, some militant and others more progressive. Many women backed away from the term "feminist" and were unwilling to lead the succeeding generation into carrying and spreading the cause. Lillian Hellman, born in 1905, wrote in her autobiography, "My generation didn't think much about the place or the problem of women. (We) were not conscious that the designs we saw around us had so recently been formed that we were still part of the formation."[3]

Agnes Smedley's feminism also did not conform to the popular feminism of the 1920s, an era whose leading feminist was Margaret Sanger. Sanger was an important spokesperson for the birth
control movement. She published much information and tried to open a clinic in 1916, suffering arrest for her activities. Sanger felt that the inability to control reproduction was a curse to the working class. Sanger, however, ultimately reformed her activity to fit the middle-class standards in the 1920s. Although Smedley may have been involved with the birth control movement of the early twentieth century, it is doubtful that she agreed to the changes that this movement made during the 1920s as it focused its attention on the middle-class, leaving the working-class behind. In *Daughter of Earth*, Marie herself has a deep problem in confronting her own sexuality: "My fear of sex expression had grown with the years. Yet I resented virginity, and the so-called 'purity' of woman, and reacted violently to any suggestion about it."[4] She also felt that "sex meant violence." We find no suggestion of any gratification for Marie when she does engage in sexual activity. When she becomes pregnant, she seems absolutely to loathe the being inside her, and abortion is the only answer. Of course, her attitude toward sex may be explained by her conditioning as a young child: "Marie.... tells how the men around her beat their wives treating them as scapegoats for their poverty and blaming them for having too many children. Yet these same wives selflessly continue sacrificing their own lives for husbands and children."[5]

*Daughter of Earth* begins with Marxist images and ends with Marie's escape to Denmark. This escape is revealed at the outset of the narrative, however, as Marie declares
that she is looking over the Danish Sea as she recalls the events of her life. The story is "of a life, written in desperation, in unhappiness."[6] The reader understands the bitterness of the narrator when she writes, "The sky before me has been gray as my spirit these days. There is no horizon--as in my life."[7] The utter hopelessness in Smedley's spirit is clear, but it is also apparent that Marie was not always bitter.

When Marie was a child, she liked to build fires. The blazing fires that were built seem to be Marxist images: "As I sit here I think vaguely of love...of fire...of the color red."[8] Significantly, it is the mother who kills these beautiful fires:

She was always tapping me with a hard steel thimble that aroused all my hatred. My beautiful fires, my glorious fires that she stamped out when she found them...it was like stamping out something within me...when the flame flared up it was so warm and friendly![9]

It is the mother who stamps out her vision and as Marie will discover, it is the mother, the woman, who "digs her own grave," by accepting, without question, the role of women in society. It is the mother who perpetuates the degraded status of women by not encouraging the power to fight within her daughters. Because of her mother's abuse, Marie was drawn to her father. But in her attempt to identify with her father, Marie begins to understand the supremacy of men over women:

slowly I was learning of the shame and secrecy of sex. With it I was learning other things--that male animals cost more than female animals and
seemed more valuable; that male fowls cost more than females and were chosen with more care. [10]

Marie also realizes that sons within a family were valued more than the daughters.

Whereas the mother stamps out Marie's vision, the father tears her from her roots. Marie feels deeply rooted in the earth: "Our life there had indeed been poor, but as I see it now, it had been healthy and securely rooted in the soil." [11] In the soil, Marie felt a connection. During her early life Marie was fascinated by the festivals and events that occurred in the farming community in Missouri; these rituals allowed people to remain vital and alive. In a strong community, there was support and general happiness; poverty did not, and could not, overtake them, for they had pride in their community. The farming community in Missouri was important to the family, and they did not want to leave it. The father, though, wanted to move on; because of his dominance in the family, the family was forced to move. Subsequently, in their lives spent wandering, the family would not only loose their sense of community, but they would also lose those connections which tied them together as a family:

And from that moment our roots were torn from the soil and we began searching for success and happiness and riches that always lay just beyond--where we were not. [12]

Even at an early age, Marie clearly expresses great hostility toward the traditional place of women in American society.
In the case of Gladys' marriage (she is a woman who lives in one of the mining communities), Marie discovers that the women in the community agreed that a woman had to "mind" her husband. Marie concludes, "Something in me revolted at this and I hated and despised them all."[13] This revulsion remains in Marie throughout the novel. After Marie inevitably leaves home, primarily to escape a fate similar to her mother's, she searches for an outlet through which to express her feelings and to meet others with the same feelings and beliefs.

In time, Marie becomes involved with the Socialist Party and the Indian Freedom Movement. These movements, however, do not fulfill Marie's need for free self-expression. In her involvement, Marie must have felt much like the women of the New Left in the 1960s. Marie constantly expresses her profound resentment of being continually defined by her sex and not by her self:

One woman, with whom I discussed the threatened deportation of the Indians, put me through an examination to find out if I was sexually interested in any Indian. Only when she found that I was not was she willing to help the Indians.[14]

Even when the two men that Marie marries pledge their belief in equality, she still finds repressive sexism in her marriages. In her marriage to Knut, her first husband, she expresses tremendous consternation at being called "Mrs. Larsen": "People call me 'Mrs. Larsen,' just as if I, Marie Rogers, had sunk into the earth, or at best had become an appendage of Knut."[15]
There seems to be no escape for Marie. No matter where she turns, she is confronted by inequality and subordination in relation to both her class and her sex. During her second marriage, to an Indian, Marie begins to have a series of dreams. The first dream includes an image of her standing on the "outer verge of the world" as she is feeling intense despair.[16]

In a second dream, she sees a large white hand and realizes that it is eternity that is filled with blackness. Again, when she awakens, she is filled with despair. The third dream conjures up the face of Death. Death is a "gigantic woman with the face of my dead mother!"[17] In this dream, she kisses the mouth of death. Marie realizes that she can no longer endure her too oppressive life. She is not able to assert her own identity or her own autonomy in marriage, in her work, in her native land.

In the end, Marie decides to leave—to leave the United States, to leave her second husband, and to leave her political involvement—and go to Denmark. She declares, "I must stand alone...."[18] In this declaration, Smedley asserts a very radical idea. Marie can no longer put up with the subordination and victimization of women in the patriarchal capitalist society of the U.S. Still more disturbing, Marie can no longer put up with the sexism that she found in left-wing politics. In her escape, she asserts her own individuality. The radicalism of this novel is Marie's refusal to conform to the standards of even the most radical politics of her day. She is so completely individualistic that she must leave. Smedley, in brutal detail, describes the sexism that existed in movements that only declared
the equality of the sexes in their rhetoric and not in actual practice. Through her class identification Marie also feels victimized as she finds the intellectuals of the Socialist Party "romanticizing" the working-class instead of discovering what the life of the working-class really was.

Smedley, through the character of Marie, does not give us any clear solutions. It seems that at this time in Smedley's life, no one had answers to the profound injustices in society. Smedley dramatizes her alienation because of the innate sexism of human society. Her vision is not simply limited to American society, since she was also involved with the Indian Freedom Movement and found sexism even among "enlightened" Indians. Only through escape is Marie able to have the chance to come to terms with herself. Her vision is indeed truly radical as she implies that the existing society must undergo an extremely radical change in order to guarantee the freedom of all people.
Women's Concerns and The Girl

The next novel in the "spectrum"--which will move from the very radical to the not so radical--is The Girl by Meridel LeSueur. Although it was not published until 1978, it was originally written in the 1930s (it was rejected for publication in 1939 when the publisher claimed that the bank robbery scene was not authentic). This novel, although it differs radically from Daughter of Earth, is nonetheless quite progressive in its implications. The primary reason why The Girl has been placed in the "second most radical" position is the spectrum owes to its emphasis on the special concerns of women, especially childbirth. Placing such as emphasis on exclusively female concerns was quite radical for the 1930s, particularly when the writer was involved with the Communist Party which had declared that women's concerns were to be subordinated to the more important cause of the revolution.

Born in 1900, Meridel LeSueur spent her childhood in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Iowa. Throughout her life, the Midwest remained her spiritual home. As a young child and adolescent, LeSueur was exposed to radical political thought and action. Her mother, while raising three children, also pursued a career as a feminist and a socialist. Meridel's father as well was active in socialist politics. Significant to her later work were her strong friendships with various women when Meridel was young. These women were from a variety of backgrounds--Indian, Polish, Irish, Scandinavian. Through these friendships, Meridel took on a deep interest of other women's lives.
In 1916, LeSueur quit high school because she disliked the "literary" curriculum and because of the alienation she felt from being ostracized by her classmates as the daughter of socialists. She then lived in an anarchist commune with Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman in New York. LeSueur also worked on the New York stage. After moving to Hollywood, she worked as a waitress and a stunt woman. She also lived in San Francisco for a time where she wrote pieces that appeared in Worker and The Masses. The years between 1917 and 1927 were very bleak years for LeSueur as she was forced to rely on uncertain income from only marginal jobs. She then married Harry Rice, a Russian-born Marxist. Between 1928 and 1930, LeSueur had two daughters; she believed strongly in the importance of the continuity of life through women (an important difference from Smedley).

Minnesota became LeSueur's home in 1929. The 1930s proved to be intensely satisfying for LeSueur. She had an audience for her work, and she could participate in groups working for social change. Through the John Reed clubs, she met Jack Conroy (another author in this study). She was on the staff of New Masses for a time and founded Midwest magazine, a regional publication, in 1936 with Dale Kramer. Also, during this time, LeSueur began to make important associations with other women. Particularly, LeSueur discovered communal living to be a very rewarding experience.

In 1934, LeSueur became involved with a strike of Minneapolis truckers, a transforming experience for her. She felt a "communion" of people, and the experience generated one of her most famous
articles, "I Was Marching." In 1935, LeSueur was a member of the presiding committee of the Communist-dominated American Writers' Congress. She also delivered a paper during this important Congress.

LeSueur wrote best about the suffering of women. However, she was severely criticized by the editors of New Masses who declared that she had a "defeatist attitude" and "nonrevolutionary spirit." Although some of her later articles were trimmed to conform to Party expectations, she was committed to sharing her feelings about suffering, not "as negative and passive, but as a source of solidarity."[1] The Girl is one example of LeSueur's exploration of the harsher realities of women's sexual lives--abortion, prostitution, sterilization, physical abuse by men. LeSueur felt that men use women as scapegoats for their own frustrations--"their inability to find jobs, their sense of hopelessness about the future. The women, in turn, submit to the indifference and the abuse, out of a fatalistic sense that this is the way things have always been and must always be."[2]

In 1924, LeSueur had joined the Communist Party: "In the 30s, her hopes, like those of so many others, centered in the CP and in the potentialities of the working class."[3] LeSueur was aware of the male domination of the Party and criticized some aspects of it; in turn, she was criticized by the Party. In the larger context, however, the Party had much to offer LeSueur, as it provided a "political theory and a program of action to which she could commit herself while at the same
time retaining the freedom to be critical."[4]

In *The Girl*, Meridel LeSueur describes the coming of age of a young unnamed girl. This novel is written in the first person, from the perspective of the girl herself. The girl seems to have no family at present and supports herself by working in a "beer joint." In this situation, the girl finds a close network of women who protect her from the harsher realities of their own lives, most specifically prostitution. The girl recalls some of the unpleasantness of her family life. Her father could be very cruel, and before he dies (at the beginning of the novel) he sends the girl a letter in which he leaves her with an ominous threat for the future: "Goodbye and good luck[spelling which appears in the text] and may my grandchildren punish my children the same as they have punished me."[5] The girl's mother, on the other hand, has a significant influence on her life. Although the girl knows that her father beat her mother, the mother defends him as a good man. The mother is a nurturing person who would give anything to the girl, including her last blanket.

The community of women is a very important and very powerful aspect of the book. The connections between women are deep and nurturing:

*I*the girl* don't feel scared when I am sitting there and it is warm and I am close to the bodies of others. I don't know them but I know them all.[6]*

In contrast, the lives of the prominent male figures are symbols
of the abusiveness of the patriarchal capitalist system: the men not only use women for their own purposes, but they also use one another for personal gains. They have little understanding of the importance of relationships. After the girl sleeps with Butch, the man that she "falls in love with," for the first time she experiences the innate distance between the sexes: "And it seemed like he just wanted to put on his clothes and get back down on the street....Butch got mad and slapped me."[7]

Politically, the girl becomes involved with the Worker's Alliance. Through one of the women who lives in the "commune" of women that is established, the girl learns about the importance of organizing for social change. She recognizes herself as a worker and then comes to understand that she is part of something greater: "And I knew that I was one of them."[8] The girl learns that she is a victim of the existing society--a society that forces girls onto the street, victimizes women by not providing legalized birth control or safe abortions, and leaves many to starve in their ignorance.

The climax of the novel is the birth of the girl's child. Significantly, as it occurs in other novels by women (except Smedley), the utopian vision is projected onto this child. Women provide this continuity of life; women are the foundation of the earth: "Why, she said, you will have a child and then you will belong to the whole earth."[9] Through the rite of childbirth the relationship between women is strengthened. The child that is born not only connects them, but also gives
them hope:

It's a woman, Belle was shouting, a sister a daughter. No dingle dangle, no rod of Satan, no sword no third arm, a girl a woman a mother.[10]

As hope is established in each generation, the stronger and greater the eventual revolution will be.
A Broad Scope: Yonnondio

Yonnondio by Tillie Olsen, like The Girl, was not published until the 1970s. However, it is important to understand that the published version today is no different from the manuscript that was written in the 1930s (The Girl has been slightly altered). The current version of Yonnondio does not have an ending; it is just as it was left in the thirties. I find it difficult to determine which novel, Olsen's or LeSueur's, is more radical since both of them make some very radical assertions. Olsen, however, has been placed in a position of "less radical" for two reasons: 1) she does not deal with exclusively female issues, and 2) her work, although dramatic in its own light, is not finished. Yonnondio, on the other hand, is very similar to The Girl in many ways.

Tillie Olsen was born in 1914, in Nebraska. Her parents were Socialists; both of them were involved in the 1905 revolution in Russia. Tillie dropped out of high school in order to go to work; her family was very poor, especially during the Depression. In 1931, she joined the Young Communist League and became active in political organizing while continuing to lead an intensely private literary and intellectual life. Olsen began to write Yonnondio in 1932, when she was nineteen. She gave birth to her first child before she was twenty. After marrying Jack Olsen in 1936, she had three more children. During the first half of the thirties Olsen lived fully "as artist, as activist, as worker and as woman/wife/mother...."[1] The repression that Olsen felt by the role imposed upon her by society affected
the production of her art:

...in her own life, and the lives of so many others, the compelling necessity to work for pay—the circumstances of class and the all-consuming responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood—the circumstance of gender, clearly have been the major silencers.... [2]

Olsen obviously believed deeply in the goals of the Left; however, she found no satisfaction when she tried to combine the various aspects of her life—wife, mother, woman, artist, political activist. When she began to write Yonnondio, Olsen hoped to link her writing and her political commitment. But the demands of motherhood and politics kept her from writing. Through political activity on the Left, Olsen felt a part of an important network:

The Left provided networks and organs for intellectual and literary exchange, gave her a sense of being a part of an international community of writers and activists engaged in the same revolutionary endeavor, and recognized and valued her talent.[3]

In her study of Olsen's life and work, Deborah Rosenfelt provides an interesting discussion of the evolution of Yonnondio, as it was told to her by Olsen herself, and its reflection of the conflict that Olsen felt. Yonnondio represents an example of a work that was restricted, and therefore not fully created, by "proletarian realism." Mazie, the protagonist, was supposed to "grow up to become an artist, a writer who could tell the experience of her people, her mother especially living in her memory. In Mazie's achievement, political consciousness and personal creativity were to coalesce."[4] Olsen, however,
could not reconcile her art with her political involvement. In the end, her art had to suffer, for it could not be expressed in a manner that would also please her political commitments: Olsen had so completely internalized the Left's vision of "what proletarian literature could and should do to show the coming of a new society that she did not even consider then the possibility of a less epic and for her, more feasible structure." [5] Yonnondio, then, remained unfinished.

Yonnondio is a portrait of a working-class family from the Midwest. Although it is written in the third person, it is told from the perspective of the young girl, Mazie. Through Mazie's eyes the reader is given a direct vision of a working-class experience. Tillie Olsen uses the character of Mazie to symbolize the hope of future generations, much in the same way that LeSueur projects hope onto the newborn child. Mazie knows of the hardships that her family must endure--the father cannot find steady work, the father beats the mother in frustration, there is little food or clothing. Mazie herself is the hopeful prospect for the future that will stop the horrors of poverty.

At the very beginning of the novel a short passage serves as a digression from the flow of the narrative. Here a young boy's fists are highlighted:

...and strong fists batter the fat bellies, and skeletons of starved children batter them, and perhaps you will be sluged by a thug, hired by the fat bellies...[6]

This image of fists (which appears in other passages as well)
is a significant aspect of the revolt of the masses as reflected in literature. Most importantly, the fists are those of children. Like LeSueur, Olsen sees children as the ones who will eventually establish the new world order. Although her utopia is not clearly defined, Olsen clearly condemns America's patriarchal capitalist society. Olsen cites the waste of materialism:

On the streets, strange vehicles move: a barrel in which one rolls; cars of apple boxes on wobbling wheels, steered by broomsticks; axles triumphantly balanced on between bare tires; Pet milk cans strung, rafted together, used as rollers on which one bellyflops and with swimming motions pushes along; and--favorite mover of all--ridden dreamily or madly to who knows what fabled destination by the commander at its steering wheel--sunken rusted Ford front end that never moves at all.[7]

The utopia, however vaguely described, would be a place where people could be truly free: "...and take it till the day millions of fists clamped in yours, and you wipe out the whole thing, the whole goddamn thing, and a human could be a human for the first time on earth."[8]

Education is also an important theme in Yonnondio. It is the education of experience, though, that takes precedence over the education that one receives in a school. Anna Holbrook, Mazie's mother, desperately wants to ensure a decent education for her children. She makes sure that they attend school. She even tries to save money for education, but school just does not turn out to be all that it is supposed to be to the children. In the farming community where Mazie and her brother first go to school, Mazie becomes "acutely conscious of her scuffed shoes, rag-bag bag clothes, quilt coat."[9] In the
packing house community, Mazie's only remembrance of the school
is how she and her brother were introduced: "Mazie and Will Holbrook-
have come from the country where they grow corn and wheat and all our milk comes-
fromsay helloto Mazie and Will children."[10] There is no image
of learning anything in school. In this, Olsen is able to
reveal her preference for education through experience. By
observing and actually living the working-class life, Olsen
hopes that Mazie (and the reader) will realize that she can
change the situation that she is in.

An older man that befriends her, Old Man Caldwell, tells her
her, "whatever happens, remember everything, the nourishment,
the roots you need are where you are now."[11] Mazie is taught
that what is important is to build up from her roots in order
to change the oppressive society in which she lives. Old Man
Caldwell advises her to keep wondering and to pay particular
attention to the example of her mother:

"Mazie. Live, don't exist. Learn from your mother,
who has had everything to grind out life and yet
has kept life. Alive, felt what's real, known
what's real... You don't know how few... 'Better,'
your mother says, 'to be cripple and alive than
dead, not able to feel anything.' No, there is
more--to rebel against what will not let life
be."[12]

Before Caldwell dies, he gives Mazie books. Significantly,
it is her father who sells them.

Whereas LeSueur relies heavily on the community of women,
Olsen focuses on the family. The family, however, is not a
positive force in the existing society. Olsen reveals the
"destructive interacting of class and sex under patriarchal
In Yonnondio, as in Olsen's other work, the family itself has a contradictory function, at once a source of strength and love, and a battleground between women and men in a system exploiting both.

As Marx and Engels wrote in the Communist Manifesto:

The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed relation of parent and child becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder....[13]

Jim, Mazie's father, takes out most of his frustrations on his children and on his wife. His family is the reason why he is not financially successful; he must feed and clothe them. But his children are indeed his own. When Mazie is almost thrown down a mine shaft by a lunatic, Jim is visibly upset and shaken. He is a victim of the capitalist society as well. He is a man who is "blinded by despair"—no matter what he does he cannot get ahead.

Anna makes the family work. She is able to somehow skimp "off of everything that had long ago been skimped on, somehow to find more necessities the body could do without."[14] Anna tries to give her children some sense of hope and tries to build some security for them. But she finally realizes that "that task of making a better life for her children to which her being bound"[15] is impossible. The mother is a crucial figure because she "wants for her children what she can no longer dream for herself: the freedom to live fully what is best to them, to the extent that the circumstances of their
lives prevent this, her love is also her despair."[16]

Yonnondio as it appears today has no resolution. In the original conception of the novel the conclusion was supposed to be:

...an affirmation of human will, familial love, and, at least in the child not yet deadened and brutalized by the struggle for sheer survival and the corrupt influence of social institutions, the drive toward achievement and creation. [17]

With the lack of a conclusion Olsen may be making a very powerful statement. As Olsen was unable to reconcile her art, her politics, and her personal life, she was never truly able to ascertain and answer to the problems that she reveals in Yonnondio.

Although Leftist politics were not as oppressive as mainstream society, Olsen still experienced sexism and a conflict between the classes in her political involvements.
From a Male Perspective: The Disinherited

The first male author to be presented is Jack Conroy, author of The Disinherited. Although Conroy has been placed in the position of the most radical male author in our pantheon, he is not nearly as radical as the previous three female writers. Conroy deals almost exclusively with the male working-class experience; in this, his vision is limited. He conforms to what was expected of him by the Party which called for the careful description of industrial labor. The Party emphasized that the revolution would achieve goals of equality through an overthrow of capitalist society. Women's concerns were secondary. In the previous three novels, women's concerns dominated and therefore, these female authors were "more radical" than Conroy as they wrote in response to oppression not only in mainstream society, but also in radical politics. As the most radical male author, Conroy develops a full portrait of his protagonist, Larry Donovan, along with Larry's class background and his eventual conversion to Marxism. Unlike the male authors who follow, Conroy does not depend upon sentimentality or romanticism. And unlike Erskine Caldwell, Conroy presents the portrait of a realistic figure and a realistic experience.

Jack Conroy was born in 1899. His home was in Moberly, Missouri. Growing up in poverty greatly influenced the writing of The Disinherited, which was published in 1933. As a young man, Conroy drifted from job to job, primarily in the Midwest. He also read widely and supposedly taught himself Latin and mathematics in order to attend the University of Missouri.
Periods of unemployment led him to become anticapitalist. He was the founder of a group known as the Rebel Poets. Later, he edited *The Anvil*, the first magazine devoted to proletarian short stories.[2]

Robert S. McElvaine has declared that proletarian fiction is "not worth discussing" (introduced in "Women and the Communist Party"). However, McElvaine cites *The Disinherited* as the one proletarian novel that stands out above the rest, praising Conroy's exceptional description of industrial labor:

> But I [Larry Donovan] never really escaped by quitting and changing jobs. All the factories had the same conveyors, the same scientific methods for extracting the last ounce of energy. The same neon tubes pulsing with blue fire and the same automatons toiling frantically beneath the ghastly rays that etched dark shadows under their eyes and blackened their lips to resemble those of a cadaver.[3]

In this "exceptional description" of industrial labor, Conroy reveals his close conformity to "proletarian realism." The novel follows the premise that "fiction should show the sufferings and struggles and essential dignity of working class people under capitalism and allow readers to see the details of their lives and work."[4] Therein lies one major weakness in the novel--it seems to be more a piece of propaganda than a work of art. The novel is often choppy and ill-connected. Although the author presents stark and carefully drawn images, he is, at times, unclear about how Marxism will better the situation of the working-class.

Walter Rideout points out that this novel commits "every error known to the self-taught novelist." The novel is a collection
of loosely-connected episodes in the life of Larry Donovan, a semi-autobiographical character. Conroy tries to recreate the language of the workers and carefully describes all aspects of the various jobs that Larry has. Although the novel does have many faults, it is significant as it does give a detailed description of industrial labor while also giving a careful progression of a young man who is converted to Marxism through his industrial involvement.

Unlike the previous two women writers who project their utopian visions onto children, Larry Donovan receives the "spark" through contacts that he makes in the factory. Also different from LeSueur's and Olsen's characters, Conroy's character goes on a quest at the end of the novel. In most of the women's novels, the characters are taught the crucial importance of building from their "roots," emphasizing the significance and strength of the community. From this, the reader gets the feeling that the "Marxist triumph" will occur through the force of progressively expanding concentric circles. Conroy's approach is much more linear. The protagonist, after being converted to Communism, goes on a journey in order to enlighten the nation, one community at a time, about the power of Marxism and the destructiveness of capitalism.

Larry Donovan's life begins in a mining community in the Midwest. Although the father dies when he is young, Larry is deeply influenced by him. The father, even though he is a coal miner, is an educated man. He is a very strong character who is vital in organizing the men of the mines in various
strikes. These strikes, however, drive the family to bouts with extreme poverty. Many times the family had barely enough food to keep them alive. The father desperately wants Larry to break the trap of the working-class. Since all of Larry's brothers died in the mines, the father is obstinate in his refusal to let Larry work in the mines. The father is even willing to work most of the day and night so that Larry would go to school. Inevitably, however, Larry's father dies in the mines. At his funeral Larry reveals that he feels as though his father had "laid down his life" for him.

Larry's mother is also an important figure. After the father dies, the mother continues to encourage Larry to get an education. Like the mother in Yonnondio, Mrs. Donovan is the selfless force behind the survival of the family. She slaves in order to make ends meet: "...Of the nights she sweated over the irons or the days she bent over the steaming tub."[4]

Both the mother and the father stress the importance of an institutionalized education, but this kind of education is presented in much the same way that Tillie Olsen sees it in Yonnondio. Larry seems to learn very little in the classroom; in fact, he seems to remember the structure of the building better than the "education" he got there:

...we were segregated in a dilapidated frame structure which looked as though it had never known paint. In the winter we had to wrap our feet in gunny sacks and leave them on in school. Our hands were often too numb to hold a pencil.[5]
In spite of this seeming lack of education, Larry does aspire to be a "railroad engineer or a policeman." When Larry is eventually sent off to work, away from the mines, he continues his education through correspondence courses, a feature of the capitalist world that he feels he has to try. But mail-order education never seems to make a great impact on him, even though he does read quite a bit on his own. Conroy relies on the education of experience. Through extreme poverty, Larry understands that the existing system must be changed:

Flies usually buzzed around the table as though they owned the place, and one of the family had to stand guard at mealtime, slowly waving a leafy wand of alder or buck brush over the victuals.[6]

Also, Larry learns of the importance of the rising of the masses through a fellow worker, a German named Hans:

"When a man's asleep you can't wake him by deploring the fact that he is asleep or silently wishing he were awake. You must shake his shoulder, shout in his ear. If he doesn't awaken at once you must keep on shouting till others join in and make such a hullabaloo that everybody's bound to listen whether he wants to or not."[7]

Although it is clear that Hans converts Larry to Communism, the German never actually teaches him about the goals of Marx aside from organizing workers. However, Larry believes in what Hans tells him, and leaves with him, in the end, in order to help him "throw the spark" that will light the "mighty Blaze."

In this important work of proletarian fiction Conroy paints a disturbing picture of the "other side of America." Although
his implications are considerably radical, particularly in his endorsement of Marxism as the answer to America's problems in the 1930s, Conroy's vision is not as encompassing as the radical visions of the three previous writers. Clearly, Conroy believes in a fundamental change of U.S. society, but his vision is limited as it only addresses the problem from a male perspective. Conroy never addresses women's issues in *The Disinherited*. His mother is a selfless work-horse and the only other women around him seem to be regarded solely as sexual objects. In this one-sided vision, Conroy ignores a vital, crucial and substantial population of the actual "disinherited"—working-class women.
A Narrow Scope: Jews Without Money

As we have already learned in "Women and the Communist Party," Michael Gold was an incredibly influential figure in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the establishment of a tradition for proletarian fiction. Not only was Gold involved in setting up guidelines for "proletarian realism," but he also contributed a work of fiction himself, Jews Without Money which was published in 1930. Jews Without Money, a semi-autobiographical account of life on the Lower East Side of New York City, is very similar to Conroy's The Disinherited in terms of its "radicalism." Placing these works next to each other in the "spectrum" was simple; deciding which one was more radical than the other was not so simple. However, Jews Without Money seemed less radical for two important reasons: 1) Gold relies too heavily on sentimentalism, and 2) the conversion of Mikey at the end is far too quick to be credible.

Michael Gold was born in 1894 as Irwin Granich. His family were Roumanian immigrants; Gold's childhood memories are described in full detail in Jews Without Money. After dropping out of school at the age of twelve, Gold began to work. His first encounter with radical politics occurred in 1914 when he happened to stumble upon an unemployment demonstration. Interest in this movement caused him to buy a copy of a radical journal called The Masses. Between the years 1915 and 1921 (when he joined the editorial staff of The Liberator, another Marxist magazine, "Gold lived the wandering exciting life of a Bohemian anarchist artist."[1]
"Towards Proletarian Art" (1921) initiated Gold's attempt to define proletarian literature. Walter Rideout declares that this essay "reflects its author's brooding emotionalism." Gold begins this "rhapsodic credo" with "In blood, in tears, in chaos and, wild thunderous clouds of fear the old economic order is dying."[2] Throughout the 1920s, Gold remained active in radical publications, such as The Liberator and New Masses (a successor to Gold's original radical experience). Through New Masses, Gold encouraged young writers to "Go Left" and to find "their materials in the experience of class-conscious workers."[3] Finally, in 1930, Gold announced the new literary form, "Proletarian Realism," which is defined in "Women and the Communist Party," and promised that there would soon be "a hundred proletarian Shakespeares."[4]

Through Jews Without Money, Gold presents one of the first "classics" of proletarian literature. It is written in the first person from the perspective of a young Jewish boy. As in The Disinherited, the utopian vision is projected upon the main male protagonist. Mikey carefully depicts, often with extreme emotion, the life in a New York City ghetto:

New York is a devil's dream, the most urbanized city in the world. It is all geometry angles and stone. It is mythical, a city buried by a volcano. No grass is found in this petrified city, no big living trees, no flowers, no birds but the drab little lecherous sparrow, no soil, loam, earth; fresh earth to smell, earth to walk on, to roll on, and love like a woman.[5]
His conversion to Marxism at the end of the novel is quite sudden. It occurs on the very last page of the narrative. Mikey is walking along the streets in search of a job and encounters a man proclaiming that "a world movement had been born to abolish poverty":

O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit... O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live... O great Beginning! [6]

Mikey is deeply influenced by both his father and mother. His parents' experiences lead Mikey to become sympathetic to socialist politics. His father is a very naive man, who loses money easily to various capitalist swindlers. Eventually, Mr. Gold feels that "one has to be selfish in America." [7] Through most of the book, however, he is a one-dimensional character who is constantly reaching for material success. Eventually, he hurts himself when he is working as a painter. The son is particularly touched by his father's plight when Mikey sees that Mr. Gold has become a broken man who cannot even succeed at selling bananas. Mikey finally comes to realize that his father is yet another victim of competitive and heartless American capitalist society.

Mikey's mother is both a very hard worker and a nurturing person. She is "fond of calling herself of work horse." [8] Selflessly she not only attends to the needs of her own family, but she also helps out other families whenever she can. Mrs. Gold is also a fighter. Even though she attempts to rally
support from other tenants, she ends up fighting the landlord herself when he refuses to maintain the apartment building properly. Obviously, Mikey has a great deal of respect for his mother, but he does not recognize any special needs of his mother as a woman. As the "home-maker," she must care for the tenement, care for the family, make any money she can in her "spare time," and selflessly give of herself at all times.

American materialism even colors Mikey's perspective on his own religion. Although he does not seem to have a highly positive opinion of religion from the start, he is particularly disgusted when a friend of his father's tries to bring over a rabbi from the old country. The friend, Reb Samuel, is able to raise a tremendous amount of money from the community to pay for the rabbi's passage to this country. But when he arrives Mikey sees that he is only a glutton who does not seem to be pious at all. This rabbi eventually leaves when he receives a better offer.

Education, on the other hand, is a positive experience for the protagonist. His parents want him to become a doctor. As he gets older, though, he more strongly realizes the importance of his financial contribution to the family. Even though his teacher tells him that he shows great potential, Mikey feels that the "burden of poverty" is so great that he decides not to go to high school. Instead, he goes to work in a factory:
Even then I could sense that education is a luxury reserved for the well-to-do. I refused to go to high school. More than half the boys in my graduating class were going to work; I chose to be one of them... It was where I belonged.[9]

After a long search, he finally finds work in a gas mantle factory. His experience there is simply horrifying:

There was not time for anything but work in that evil hell-hole. I sweated there for six months. Monkey face tortured me. I lost fifteen pounds in weight. I raged in nightmares in my sleep. I forgot my college dreams; I forgot everything, but the gas mantles.[10]

His description of industrial labor and the working-class experience is, however, much more melodramatic than Conroy's. Gold tries to draw on the sympathies of the reader on a very emotional level; it seems that Gold wants the reader to feel sorry for him, as an oppressed person, instead of soliciting support from the politically awakened reader.

The vision that is presented in Jews Without Money lacks a far-reaching scope. The conversion experience that occurs is far too fast for any reader to understand. Also, the description of labor and the working-class experience is too sentimental and emotional for a reader to really sympathize with. As in The Disinherited, Gold also leaves out female concerns. He calls for a revolution, but this revolution is vague and one-dimensional. Gold is unable to arouse his audience into a Marxist ferment as he fails to present a revolution that would truly seem to uplift the masses.
The next author in the "spectrum" is Erskine Caldwell. In *God's Little Acre* Caldwell presents a desperately pathetic picture of the poor in the rural South. As the spectrum leads from a very radical perspective to one that is not particularly radical, Caldwell can be viewed as an author that closely examines the plight of the poor, but chooses to tell their story in a more objective narrative. Unlike Gold and Conroy, Caldwell himself does not seem to be "selling" any particular political ideology, but the "rescuing" of those he portrays from utter poverty and ignorance demands some action of a radical nature. Clearly, characters are from a part of American society too often ignored by mainstream America. Placing Caldwell in the spectrum was difficult. His style and his images are very different from the other novels in this study. Since his characters are so overwhelmingly pathetic, even grotesque, it is sometimes difficult to place them in a realistic context. Nonetheless, Caldwell presents a moving rendition of poverty which can also force the reader to consider American ideals as they clash with American realities.

Erskine Caldwell is the first author considered in this essay that does not have a working-class background. Born in Georgia in 1903, he was the son of a Presbyterian minister and a teacher. His family moved frequently when Erskine was young, and he saw many areas of the South. When he was of high school age, the family settle in Wrens, Georgia. During his high school years, Caldwell began working for a newspaper.
Also, during this time, he began to study rural life around Wrens. Caldwell first attended Erskine College, but later transferred to the University of Virginia. While working for Atlanta Journal, he decided that he wanted to be a professional writer. In 1926, he quit the newspaper and settled in rural Maine to devote all of his time to writing fiction. In 1930, Caldwell read all that he had produced in the late 1920s and was so dissatisfied that he burned much of it in a bonfire. [1]

After the famous bonfire, Caldwell's entrance into the literary scene was quick. The publication of Tobacco Road (1932) and God's Little Acre (1933) established him as one of "America's most interesting young writers." [2] Along with his novels and stories, Caldwell also wrote nonfiction. The year 1935 was a particularly important year for this nonfiction. In several articles he examined the conditions that he had used as the shocking background material for Tobacco Road and God's Little Acre. The next year, 1936, Caldwell travelled around the South with Margaret Bourke-White, an accomplished photographer. Through this endeavor, Caldwell wanted to provide the public with actual photographs of what he had been trying to describe in his fiction and nonfiction. In 1937, You Have Seen Their Faces was published with photographs by Bourke-White and essays by Caldwell. Although Caldwell regards himself as a story-teller and not a social reformer, the stories that he tells expose the harsh realities of an American capitalist society that many people of the thirties tried to change. Still, You Have Seen Their Faces is no more consciously ideological (Marxist)
than are Caldwell's novels. His vision is not really a "revolutionary" one.

_God's Little Acre_ is the story of the Waldens, a desperately poor farming family. Their poverty owes in part to Ty Ty’s (the father’s) obsession with finding gold on his land. He has been digging for gold all over the farm for fifteen years. As the years have progressed, he has begun to ignore any other farming. Finally, he realizes that there could be gold on "God's Little Acre"--the piece of land that he has reserved for the purposes of God. When he realizes this, he temporarily moves "God's Little Acre" in order not to interfere with his gold mining operations.

The characters in _God's Little Acre_ are not revolutionary, although they certainly could be described as controversial. It does not seem immediately apparent that Caldwell has the same utopian vision that the other writers in this essay have. From my perspective, Caldwell exaggerates his fictional world too much. His characters are stereotypical past the point of ridiculous. There is an obvious absence of a mother figure and all of the women seem to be somewhat less fully realized. Ty Ty cites his daughter, Darling Jill, as a "perfect little female" as if he were describing a dog. The women are, for the most part, sexual objects, especially exemplified through the character of Griselda, another one of Ty Ty's daughter's all of the men want to possess her. Will, Ty Ty's son-in-law who is married to Rosamond, is obsessed by Griselda and eventually tells her:
"He [Ty Ty] knew what he was talking about. He told me about you, lots of times, but I didn't have sense enough to take you then. But I'm going to now. Nothing in God's world can stop me now. I'm going to have it, Griselda. I'm as strong as God Almighty Himself now, and I'm going to do it."[3]  

Although Caldwell does not project a utopian vision onto any of his characters, it would seem that he may by trying to ask the reader to develop such a vision. The only revolutionary character in the novel is Will, a mill worker who becomes involved in a strike. At the beginning of the novel, Caldwell describes Will's vision:

All day long there was a quiet stillness about the ivy-walled mill. The machinery did not hum so loudly when the girls operated it. The men made the mill hum with noise when they worked there. But when evening came, the doors were flung open and the girls ran out screaming in laughter. When they reached the street, they ran back to the ivy-covered walls and pressed their bodies against it and touched it with their lips. The men who had been standing idly before it all day long came and dragged them home and beat them unmercifully for their infidelity.[4]

Near the end of the novel, though, Will dies a hero's death in an attempt to reopen the mill. There is no hope for the characters in God's Little Acre; they are poor, ignorant, and confused. However, at the end of the narrative, Ty Ty makes a desperate plea:

"There was a mean trick played on us somewhere. God put us in the bodies of animals and tried to make us act like people. That was the beginning of trouble. If He had made us like we are, and not called us people, the last one of us would know how to live....I feel like the end of the world has struck me. It feels like the bottom
dropped completely out from under me. I feel like I'm sinking and can't help myself."[S]

The characters in God's Little Acre, however grostequely portrayed, are still members of the existing order. Although average readers probably could not identify with these characters, they could at least be enlightened in regard to another section of American society. It is also important to realize that, unlike the other authors studied in this essay, Caldwell had neither a close connection with the Communist Party nor with radical politics. He was a popular writer and, in that, brought the picture of the working-class experience to mainstream America. Although many Americans may have bought God's Little Acre for its "outspoken" approach (at least in relation to its time) to sexuality, the novel still exposed a harsh side of American society, one that simply could not be denied. The plight of the working-class was not just a concern of the working-class or radical intellectuals and writers, it was also the concern of popular writers, like Erskine Caldwell, who revealed an American region in dire need of change.
Romanticism of Radical Politics: Moon-Calf

The seventh novel in the "spectrum" is Floyd Dell's Moon-Calf. Since this novel was published in 1920, it precedes the next earliest work by nine years. Even though it was written in a social and political climate much different from that of the other novels, it is a significant work to include because it provides a perspective of a "proletarian" novel written before the established "proletarian" tradition. Dell also was an important figure in radical politics in the 1920s; he might be called a kind of "flip-side" to Michael Gold. I put Moon-Calf on the relatively conservative side of the spectrum because, although the novel is supposed to show the "development of a radical thinker," the protagonist turns out to maintain a very romantic vision of radical politics and eventually conforms to the values of the "real world"--a world that, I would argue, he has always been drawn to, especially in relation to its capitalist values.

Floyd Dell was born in 1887 in Barry, Illinois. Before his birth, his father's butcher shop had prospered and then failed: "The boy grew up loathing poverty, critical of a charming but rebellious father, who had proved incapable of providing for the family."[1] His mother, a teacher, was Dell's "moral authority." Floyd loved to read as a boy and in order to cope personally with his family's degrading poverty, he began to think of himself as a rebel. At sixteen, he joined the Socialist Party, and in 1903, he dropped out of high school. Floyd was encouraged to write by many people outside the family.
From his experience writing for the Friday Literary Review (a literary supplement of the Chicago Evening Post) in the early part of the century, he developed the conviction that literature could help bring the new Socialist order. Also, Dell had an interest in feminism, which was especially brought out in his early years.

In 1913, Dell joined the staff of The Masses. By the end of the decade, The Masses had been suppressed by a Red-fearful federal government, and Dell found himself on trial because of his radical activity. Dell became the associate editor of the Marxist-oriented Liberator in 1918. By 1920, the conflict between his "impulse to rebel and his desire for order had already brought him to the conclusion that man must adapt himself to his world and to others":

The moon-calf hero was to become the typical Dell character: the sensitive, lonely, idealistic dreamer (either a young man or woman) whose intellectual and emotional "pilgrimage" begins in a small town and leads, after a series of experiences that consist mostly of reading books, of talk, of love affairs--usually in several towns or cities--to an acceptance of the "real world" which means sacrificing rebellious ideals for conventional realities.[2]

Dell was critically attacked by Michael Gold in the late 1920s for this conventional romantic vision and for repudiating his working-class background. In the early 1920s, however, Dell had been a hero of young radicals because of his support of "free love" and communal utopian ideals. By the end of the decade and the advent of the Depression, Dell was clearly no longer radical enough to be considered a hero. The generation
of writers who became prominent in the 1930s dealt with more egregiously political issues, such as the overthrow of capitalism, instead of more personal ones, like "free love." Dell represents an early radical image-maker. Even though he was writing in a repressive time (Moon-Calf was published only one year after the Red Scare of 1919), Dell was not writing in a time when working-class heroes were gaining much attention. In choosing not to discuss, in detail, the problems of industrial labor (even when he describes his hero Felix's factory job, he is not as effective as Conroy and Gold were in portraying the deadly effects of mechanization on the worker), the greediness of the capitalist system in exploiting the worker, the filth and degeneration of ghetto areas, the victimization of women, and so on, Dell ends by presenting a very "pretty" picture of the development of a "radical" thinker. Dell creates no picture that would stir the reader into, at the very least, sympathizing with the degrading plight of the working-class.

Moon-Calf is the story of Felix Fay, born of a very poor family in the Midwest. Since he is very "bookish," Felix has few friends as a child and seems to be a sort of outcast. Felix's world "was a world of dreams" where he constantly fantasizes. There is also the suggestion of a powerful Oedipal complex in Felix:

In the house lived Mama. She carried him to bed, and would say "poetry-pieces" to him before he went to sleep if he asked her, and she gave him bread-'n'-butter-'n'-sugar between meals. She was beautiful and kind, and never cross with him. Sometimes she would play with him. Then she was
the nicest person in the world, and his very own Mama. But at other times, when he came eagerly to her with his picture-book or his toys, she would say, "Run along, darling. I'm talking to Papa." She was a different person then, not his own at all, but a stranger; and he would go away, grieving and hurt.[3]

When he is not attending school, which he loves, Felix spends much of his time reading. Through the immense amount of reading that he does, Felix begins to toy with both atheism and socialism. Felix's early life is torn apart by his mother's abandonment of the family, the maturation and subsequent flight of older siblings, and the inability of his father to support the family and keep it together. Felix is in his early teens when the family dissolves and he then embarks on a series of journeys, all of which tear him from his roots.

As in many of the other novels, an emphasis on education is apparent in Moon-Calf. Because he is so bookish and seemingly intelligent, Felix's family insists that he try to get a substantial education. After the dissolution of the family, however, Felix begins to question the importance of education to his brother Ed and his wife. Felix tells them that he wishes to quit high school. They talk him out of it by convincing him that he needs to finish in order to go on to business college. Felix, although he does do some factory work in a candy factory, eventually begins working for a newspaper. Through his experience there, Felix begins to dream of going to Chicago—a better site for his writing capabilities. The novel ends with Felix's repeating the word "Chicago" in his mind over and over again. In dreaming of Chicago, Felix relinquishes his "class-consciousness"—if he really had one to begin with—and leaves behind any potential
for radical activity as he comes to conforms to what he sees as the dominance and inevitability of the "real world."

Socialism and other radical ideas are much too abstract for Felix to truly assimilate. Felix seems to toy with some of these ideas through the books that he reads and then, just as a matter of coincidence, bumps into just the right person or pamphlet. Soon after Felix declares himself to be an atheist, he just happens to wander into an "Art Gallery," in which works of art are mysteriously absent, owned by a man who sponsors lectures on atheism. After he is introduced to the idea of socialism, he stumbles upon a pamphlet about socialism on the street. Most of Felix's "radical" thinking goes on when he is quite young, when he is just a teenager. He is never really able to transfer this thinking into his life as he grows up and assumes more responsibilities.

Almost every reader can see the obvious dichotomy between Felix's conceptions of political ideologies and "real life." Felix finds himself incapable of transforming his romantic visions of political ideals into real-life activities and commitments. In the end, "real life" wins and his "radical thinking" is pushed aside: "He was not quite sure, now, that he was really a Socialist. Ideas, he realized were different from realities; and he was living in the real world, and getting along very well."[4]

Felix also fails to mesh his political ideas with "reality" in his affair with Joyce Tennant, the niece of the owner of the newspaper where Felix works. With Joyce, Felix attempts to define his ideas of "free love." Eventually, Joyce seems
to be convinced that "free love" may be worth trying. In truth, however, their relationship is only an affair that is symbolized by their habitual escape to an island that is owned by the major capitalist of the town, Joyce's uncle. Ultimately, Felix's vacillation over the relationship between political ideals and reality forces Joyce to marry another suitor, one who seems prepared for financial success. Felix's continual problem in meshing the personal and the political shows him to be a character who is in fact not all that radical. Dell wrote this novel at a time when radical political ideas were more acceptably "romantic" for middle-class readers. In the 1930s, however, radical thinkers actually discovered the convergence of radical politics and reality as the established economic system suddenly collapsed.
Conforming to Politics: Call Home the Heart

The eighth and final novel considered in my study is Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart*. This novel conforms completely to dominant attitudes of the time. Although it raises radical issues, such as women's responsibility in the home, the main character retreats to standard roles on almost all counts in the end. We can, in some ways, find important similarities between Burke's novel and the other novels written by our other women, especially to *The Girl* and *Yonnondio*, but Burke's resolution is strikingly different from Olsen's and LeSueur's. This traditionally "safe" conclusion earns Burke the "least radical" position in the spectrum, as she conforms to the dominant dictates of Party priorities and subordinates her feminism in such a clear way. Significantly, Burke's novel was published in 1932, a time dominated by the subordination of women's concerns in the Communist Party and in society in general.

Fielding Burke, the pseudonym of Olive Tilford Dargan, was born in 1869 in Kentucky to an academic family. Dargan attended George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville and, eventually, Radcliffe College. After the drowning death of her husband in 1915, she returned to Kentucky to write. During her lifetime, Dargan "published social fiction under the pseudonym Fielding Burke while using her real name for poetry and local-color stories."[1] Although Burke was never a member of the Communist Party, she was known to have left-wing leanings. She was most deeply concerned with the exploitation of poor Southerners, and her concerns are reflected in her work. The
inspiration for Call Home the Heart came from a bloody textile strike at Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929. This famous strike, incidentally, provoked the writing of several other novels, including Mary Heaton Vorse's Strike! (1930) and Grace Lumpkin's To Make My Bread (1932).

Call Home the Heart tells the story of Ishma Waycaster Hensley, a seemingly independent mountain woman. The novel is told in the third person, but its perspective is Ishma's. Ishma has been reared by her mother, Laviny (her father died when she was ten), who is also an independent woman, but seems to be unnurturing. Ishma is most influenced by her grandmother. This grandmother, who died when Ishma was thirteen, was a free-spirited soul. Upon her death, the grandmother leaves Ishma her collection of recipes written by old friends and three books. More importantly, Granny Starkweather leaves Ishma with a great appreciation for nature and the mountain that she lives on. Out of respect for her grandmother's vision, Ishma keeps one day of the week for herself and spends that day on the mountain, alone.

On the other hand, Ishma is the work horse of the family: "The girl was almost single-handed in her struggle to make the farm keep them all decently alive."[2] Ishma's family is an extended one, comprised of Ishma, her mother, her sister Bainie, Bainie's husband and children, and eventually Ishma's husband and children. Ishma is completely selfless in her attempt to keep the farm, on which the family lives producing crops. After her marriage to Britt, she decides to plant a
new field that is not being used by the rest of the family. She literally has to work nights so that tilling the field does not conflict with her other chores. One night, not long after her marriage to Britt, she hears the ringing of cow bells and realizes that a herd of cows must have broken the fence to her newly planted field. Ishma, single-handedly, gets the cows out of the field and keeps them out, all in the darkness of night.

As she grows up, Ishma is initially opposed to marriage. She is depicted as a stocky woman who is fiercely independent. However, despite her looks, Ishma eventually comes to draw the attentions of two men, Rad Bailey and Britt Hensley. Ishma soon discovers that she too, like all other women, can find true happiness and fulfillment in marriage. She chooses Britt to be her husband and then falls hopelessly in love with him:

Ishma had never felt such strength in her limbs, such surety in her heart. The first summer of her married life had been a happy one; but this later happiness had in it a buoyancy of triumph. She had known hopelessness, grief, and the dismay that flows from an enfeebled body. Now that they were gone, joy rose in their wake with the zest of a conqueror.[3]

Inevitably, however, Ishma once again comes to yearn for her freedom. The love that she feels for Britt does not seem completely to fulfill her: "Surely their love had not vanished; it had strangely deepened; but where was its joy, its fulness, its soothing finality?"[4] Ishma increasingly develops the feeling that she must leave the mountain in order to experience
a truly independent life; the obligations pressed upon her by her family and her husband become too much for her.

Ishma flees from the mountain with Rad Bailey, her new lover, to settle in an urban, industrial city where Rad finds work in a factory. Ishma, arriving in the city pregnant, remains at home to have and care for the child. In the city, though, Ishma only discovers another aspect of her subordination: she cannot truly be free in a system that gives such emphasis to financial success. Ishma also discovers the poor worker "trapped by the cruel paternalism of the textile factories...."[5]

Through the people she meets in the factory community, Ishma is introduced to Marx and begins to educate herself about Marxism. After the death of her child, Vennie (who is killed in an automobile accident), Ishma becomes involved in strike organization. Ishma, however, becomes deeply troubled by her inability to overcome her racist rejection of other strike participants and organizers, her co-workers, who are black.

Inevitably, since this novel clearly fulfills its label as a "less radical" work, Ishma abandons her new-found political consciousness and activity in order to return to her mountain home. The voice of her husband Britt had haunted her in the city, and she decides that her commitment to her husband and family is more important than her initial revolt in order to satisfy her own desire for independence. Furthermore, her love of the land and the tranquil beauty of the mountain call her back. Ishma, although she abandons all of her radical politics, still retains a partially utopian vision of a communal
farm of sorts:

"I was thinking about a lot of kids that I'd like to bring up here in the summer—every summer.... We could build bark shelters for them, or use your old tobacco sheds.... Some of the mothers can come up and help me with the hens and cows. And I know men that the mills have scrapped who'd be made over by one summer up here."[6]

The vision of the communal farm does take on a romantic quality as does Ishma's vision of the new society:

"No matter if the rich do hold all the weapons. Love is as impartial as the rain. It will creep to them too, and they will drop the spears of oppression. Ay, they will open their hearts and know all men as brothers. They will...."[7]

In **Call Home the Heart**, Burke dramatizes a utopian vision similar to most of the other novelists in this essay. Like Olsen and LeSueur, Burke projects her utopian vision onto a child. The striking difference, though, is that Burke's child is a male child, Ned. Ned is Ishma's only surviving child (her twins die from a fever, and Vennie dies in the automobile accident). Even though Ishma abandons her political activities and develops a romantically pastoral vision of how society will change, Burke suggests some hope in the child. However idealized, Ned still has the opportunity to change the world in which he lives. He especially inherits the strength to accomplish this change through his mother:

It wasn't Britt's head whose beloved weight lay so light against her. It was Ned's. Her fair young son was getting strength from her heart. [8]
Burke, in *Call Home the Heart*, is perhaps this essay's clearest demonstration of the dominating trend to suppress feminist issues and ideals. Ishma's true station in life and ultimate fulfillment is achieved through marriage and the establishment and nurturance of a family. In trying to assert a separate identity, Ishma discovers that she, as a woman, is not capable of fully understanding political ideas nor of participating in political activities effectively. Burke's message is that women must leave important issues to men, who are the only ones truly capable of performing such important revolutionary functions and thinking such profound thoughts. Significantly, Burke, unlike LeSueur and Olsen, was able to publish her message in the thirties. She conformed to the dominant ideals of radical politics of the time—feminism must be suppressed in order that the revolution be achieved.
Conclusion

In their inability and refusal to look at the entire picture, radicals sold themselves short. In the eight works that have been discussed here, it is clear that the suppression of women's issues left a void in the vision of radicals, in particular, radical working-class writers. Women, in their attempt to produce creative and stimulating novels, found difficulty in expressing themselves in relation to what was expected of them. Tillie Olsen, especially, felt this repression strongly. The tension between the expectations of the Party, personal convictions, artistic values, and family responsibilities as a woman all converged on Olsen; the tremendous conflict induced by this convergence is painfully displayed in *Yonnondio*, a dynamic, thought-provoking and hauntingly stirring work that is left unresolved. Olsen simply could not produce a resolution, given all of the pressures that were placed on her by the society in which she lived. Even though she was involved in radical politics, she was not allowed to express herself freely. In the end, her politics won, and feminism was subordinated. Unfortunately, those who would have read her novel were denied a new perspective--one that considered the needs and personalities of both men and women.

On the other hand is the consideration of an acknowledged "classic" of proletarian fiction, Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*. Although this novel should not be denied its place as an important work of working-class fiction, it is certainly not as dynamic or as far-reaching in scope as *Yonnondio*. Jews
Without Money consistently falls into periods of sheer emotionalism and weepy sentimentality that disfigure the horrifying portraits that Gold tries to draw. Conversely, in many ways Jews Without Money is far too depressing to make a vital impact on the reader. Instead of creating a picture that would generate active support from the reader, Gold leaves us feeling drawn and hopeless. The conversion experience at the end of the novel is far too quick and undeveloped to provide a realistic answer to the profound injustices of American capitalist society.

Between Agnes Smedley and Fielding Burke, a broad spectrum of working-class literature has been analyzed here. Whereas Agnes Smedley turns to anarchy in order to escape the intense pressure put on her to conform, Fielding Burke advocates abandoning assertions of individuality. Burke undoubtedly felt much of the same pressure that Smedley felt, since Burke's character, Ishma, yearns to find a new life off of the mountain, but she confronts this pressure in a very different way. Burke feels that the constraints of American society are far too great and far too deep to be escaped from or changed in a revolutionary fashion. In Call Home the Heart, Burke subordinates her feminist and individualist attitudes and basically concludes by furthering the myth that women can find true happiness through marriage and family.

In many ways, Burke's Call Home the Heart does just what the Communist Party ordered. Although the CP-USA seemed to be sympathetic to women's issues, it gave the "revolution" top priority. Communists, men and women, felt that equality for all could only be achieved through a Communist triumph. Placed
in this context, many women wrote more radical literature. These women, compelled by their desires to assert their individual identities, which meant breaking down already existing social codes, were repressed. For the most part, women in the 1930s were not "allowed" to assert themselves if they still wanted to be part of the "revolution." Smedley wrote before the Communist Party became popular in the 1930s and did not feel constrained primarily because she even denounced the repression in radical politics. Burke, on the other hand, subjugated herself to the strain. Olsen and LeSueur, however, were torn between their need to assert their individual identities, especially as women, and their desire to witness and participate in a potential Marxist triumph. They both were ultimately deluded by the "conviction" that a Marxist triumph would bring equality to all; they subordinated their individualism and therefore, subordinated their art.

The men, as well, were victims of the limited Communist vision. Both activists and writers were still subject to established social codes that were so much a part of society (and still are) that they could not recognize them. In relation to what was presented in this essay, they were especially blind to the restrictions put on women. Women were expected to care for the family, do the menial work and, if artistic, create images that subordinated female concerns to the "revolution" just because they were women. The men, although their visions were indeed radical in respect to the established economic structure, did not understand the special concerns of women
who experienced the problems of raising a family, the anger of being identified by their sex and not their natures and the tension of wanting to be active in the movement, but having so many "unrecognized" responsibilities in the home. This limited male vision is particularly evident in several of these works of fiction. Conroy and Gold, specifically, had great esteem for their mothers but were not able to see that their mothers were selfless work horses who were, in truth, slaves to the existing economic and social structures.

All of the novelists in this essay create powerful images of the working-class experience in early twentieth-century America. They provide moving and distinctive portraits of Americans, men and women who are often ignored or omitted from mainstream American literature. Most of them, too, advocate a revolutionary change to the existing structure, a structure that exploits and dehumanizes "the masses." In almost every case, the change that is emphasized and supported is Marxism. Even though these artistic expressions chiefly advocate such a change, they should not be pushed aside and labelled as "propaganda." They are indeed artistic representations of a new vision; they were the beginnings of a new tradition. Although the female writers are typically more radical, because of their sex, than the male writers, they all still reveal pictures and impressions of the profound injustices that exist in our society--primarily the victimization and dehumanization of people because of their class and their sex. All of these novels should be considered an intricate part of the American
literary tradition because they, in most cases, provide intimate portrayals of vital American people—the people who do the "dirty work" and are the crucial element in the backbone of this country.
ENDNOTES

Introduction and "Women and the Communist Party"

[5] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 119.
[6] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 120.
[7] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 120.
[8] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 121.
[9] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 122.
[10] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 122.
[12] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 124.
[14] Ware, Holding Their Own, p. 127.

"The Radicalism of Daughter of Earth"

"Women's Concerns and The Girl"

[9] LeSueur, p. 112.

"A Broad Scope: Yonnondio"


"From a Male Perspective: The Disinherited"

"A Narrow Scope: Jews Without Money"


"A Picture of Rural Poverty: God's Little Acre"


"Romanticism of Radical Politics: Moon-Calf"

[4] Dell, p. 239.

"Conforming to Politics: Call Home the Heart"

List of Works Consulted


