# MIDWESTERN MISCELLANY X

*being essays on midwestern women writers by members of*

The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature

*edited by*

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In Honor of Two Talented Midwesterners
Susan Glaspell
and
David D. Anderson

## PREFACE

*Midwestern Miscellany X* marks another first for the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, a society which eleven years ago dedicated itself, in the words of the first announcement, to "encouraging and supporting the study of Midwestern literature in whatever direction the interests of the members may take." The study of Midwestern women writers is one of our directions. In 1980, David D. Anderson invited me to organize this volume. I was honored to do it, and hope the five essays I chose reveal the amazing talent, innovation, and diversity of Midwestern women writers.

The authors studied here represent women from various Midwestern locales, eras, classes, and cultures: Toni Morrison, born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931, is a native of Lorain, Ohio. She is one of America's very best living novelists. The beauty and power of her prose shocks and delights both popular audiences and scholars. Tillie Olsen was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1913. She won the O. Henry Award in 1961 for "Tell Me A Riddle." Few writers have received such wide respect for so small a body of work. Olsen is revered for the gem-like quality of her short fiction and for her fortitude in creating such beauty without the luxury of education, while earning a living and raising four children. She is a living reminder that some voices cannot be silenced. Louise Simpson Arnow was born in Wayne County, Kentucky in 1908, and lived much of her life in Michigan. Her Appalachian histories are important contributions to culture and knowledge, and her novel, *The Doll Maker*, 1954, is magical. Jessamyn West, born in Indiana, 1907, is still another variety of Midwestern woman artist, one who writes for popular audiences, has put Quaker life back into the popular imagination and who dared to risk the support of her established audience by writing about sexual openness before it was fashionable. Alice Gerstenberg, born in 1885, one of the "lost" women of the Chicago Renaissance, is yet another example of a Midwestern writer. Educated at Bryn Mawr, wealthy, intuitive, and original, she created a one act play, *Overtones,* which helped lead little theater toward using psychoanalysis in its experimental drama.

I think these essays underscore the fact that women have made an invaluable contribution to Midwestern litrature. Between the talent of the critics who have written these essays, and the artists they examine, it seems the Midwest and the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature are in good shape.

Once a Midwesterner, always a Midwesterner, seems to be one of the mottoes of our society, both in terms of those who participate and those we study. I encourage people from all over the country to join in our endeavor to understand and define Midwestern writings. Susan Glaspell, one writer from Iowa, represented here in spirit, names her continual connection to the Midwest in an autobiographical sketch (which can be found in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library):

> Almost everything I write has its roots in the Middle West. I suppose because my own are there. I kept going back there all the time my mother and father were living, and later to Chicago, where I had a brother. Chicago is many things to many people and to me it is a place where you can write.

This volume of *Midwestern Miscellany* is dedicated to Susan Glaspell, dramatist, fiction writer, biographer, and to all of the women writers who have contributed to the cultural heritage of the Midwest. And it is dedicated to David D. Anderson, the founder of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, whose commitment to art and learning helps make such volumes as this possible.

Marilyn J. Atlas

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# "'WE WAS GIRLS TOGETHER'": A STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

ANNA SHANNON

Historically, American black authors have advocated assimilation, pluralism, or separatism to solve the "American dilemma." Contemporary black authors such as John Oliver Killens and more recently Toni Morrison have chosen a separatist stance, emphasizing what W. E. B. Dubois called the "double consciousness" or schizophrenia produced by the attempt of blacks to achieve the American dream. In *The Cotillion, or One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (1971), Killens's message is stated by Ben Ali Lamumba, the novel's new black artist: "'Every father's child of us has been brainwashed with the whitewash. All of us is trying to make the journey home.'"[1]

In their "experimental"[2] journeys, the solitary characters of Killens, Morrison, and other black authors challenge the conventions of their own communities and reject the "American dream." Socially and interpersonally dangerous, because they have nothing left to lose, they may be scapegoated by the black community, where their "way out" behavior threatens the uneasy accommodation of blacks to the whitewash conventions of the majority culture. Typically and tragically, these characters might have helped transform American life, if their strength and talent had not been denied creative channels.

In *Tar Baby* (1981), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Sula* (1973), and *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison depicts black communities which have disappeared or been unable to resist, except through humorous inversion, the definitions imposed by white society. In these novels, she presents a dialectic between those who attempt to salvage independent identities and those who have been

co-opted by what she calls "'that little community value thing.'"[3] Since her primary focus is the question of maintaining an identity in the face of racism, Morrison's concern with the oppression of black women is complicated or compromised to varying degrees in her fiction so that she can directly sympathize with those characters — usually male — who struggle for independence at whatever cost to themselves or others.

For Morrison, self definition must precede social responsibility, and therefore the black men who leave black women behind in pursuit of the freedom to find themselves are treated positively in her fiction. Although she recognizes that "'Black women are the people in the world who had no place to go,'" Morrison clearly prefers the expansive world that has been available to black men to the enclosed world available to black women. Speaking of the black men who "'spread their seed all over the world'" in endless escape from prescribed roles and responsibilities, Morrison observes:

> "... that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life. I guess I'm not suppose to say that. But the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me: It's part of the whole business of breaking ground, doing the other thing.'[5]

In *Sula*, a novel which explores the thwarted relationships of young women, Morrison demonstrates that "'doing the other thing'" must precede self discovery for women as well as men. Here, too, she focuses on the dialectic between characters with antithetical perspectives — Sula Peace who rebels and Nel Wright who conforms. In adding the defiant Sula to the ranks of unshackled males created by other writers of the "new Renaissance," however, Morrison universalizes the struggle for freedom through an implicit attack on patriarchal values. This attack gives deeper resonance to Morrison's critique of American society, revealing the comprehensiveness of her artistic vision.

The enigmatic, isolated Sula is at the center of a labyrinth of female relationships in the novel. "Dangerous" because she has nothing to direct her "tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor" (105), Sula embraces her alienation and becomes a woman of whim and caprice, drifting from one sexual affair to



the next without sharing her private thoughts or rebellious feelings. Through the depiction of Sula's and Nel's friendship as a contrasting ideal, Morrison suggests the shallow nature of conventional relationships between men and women with their "same language of love . . . entertainments of love, . . . cooling of love" (104). Sula's last and most intense affair is with Ajax, a man whose name she learns only after he has fled. This self-destructive affair and Nel's equally self-destructive marriage suggest the limits of women's relationships with men in the novel. These fleeting heterosexual relationships and the conformity of Nel's and Sula's neighbors come to represent forces that imperil women's friendships and set daughter against mother, making personal growth and fulfillment and the roles of wife and mother mutually exclusive for many women.

What Louise Bernikow identifies in the novel as "the force of respectability"[6] blights both Sula's and Nel's lives. Failing to calculate the irrational power of sexual possessiveness, Sula violates Nel's trust by sleeping with Jude, Nel's husband. After Sula has died, Nel discovers the relative unimportance of the loss of Jude compared to the loss of Sula. The question Sula asks Nel — "'If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?'" (125) — remains to haunt Nel when the loss of Sula and the possibilities she represented are understood.

Morrison's unconventional answer to Sula's question emerges in the treatment of the intense, girlhood friendship between Sula and Nel, a friendship threatened by Nel's marriage and conventional attitudes far more than by Sula's impulsive behavior. The friendship takes on added significance in the light of Morrison's depiction of a treacherous chasm between mothers and daughters in a community where standards are rapidly being eroded by white values. When the "neighborhood" disappears during the course of Nel's lifetime with the uprooting of nightshade and blackberry patches to build the Medallion golf course, white values and white ways have clearly begun to take a toll on the black community in the hills, once ironically called the "'Bottom'" (4). The loneliness of this assimilated phase of the Bottom's history is suggested by the "Separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by" (143) in what was once a neighborhood. The spread of old folks'

homes testifies to a breakdown in family feeling which intensifies Sula's and Nel's need for each other.

The people of the Bottom with their jokes, gossip, superstitions, and malice are a presence in the novel, amplifying the growing difference between the two friends which eventually becomes rending conflict. In the hostile milieu created by the ubiquitous "they" of the novel, public opinion often mirrors white opinion. Morrison emphasizes this point several times. Thus, when rumors fly that Sula has slept with white men:

> Everyone of them imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections—Sula underneath some white man—and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier. The fact that their own skin color was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did. (98)

Women in Sula's and Nel's community suffer the penalties of this sexual double standard which divides them from each other and offers little actual status or protection by way of compensation. Sula's and Nel's friendship initially exempts them from such penalties. Forged through intensely shared experiences and an early understanding that "all freedom and triumph was forbidden them," since "they were neither white nor male," their friendship creates a world of mutually-agreed upon values and allows them to "use each other to grow on" (44).

Morrison emphasizes the strength of Sula's and Nel's bond repeatedly throughout the novel, and by giving equal time to both characters suggests the powerful, if unacknowledged impact each has on the other. The contrasting but complementary imagery of their adolescent fantasies foreshadows the divergent paths they will take as adults, but implies that they are only complete when they are together. Thus, Nel imagines a "fiery prince" who will rescue her from ordinary existence, while Sula imagines herself



galloping "on a gray-and-white horse" (44).[7] Sula's cantankerous grandmother Eva recognizes the bond Sula and Nel share when she tells Nel at the end, " 'Never was no difference between you' " (145). Both Nel and Sula reflect on the way they complete each other. Resuming her relationship with Sula after Sula's ten-year absence from Medallion, Nel thinks, "Talking with Sula had always been a conversation with herself" (82). And Sula recalls before she dies " 'the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price' " (126).

Initially, the integrity of their union provides strength — strength for Nel to resist the command to pull her nose to make it "good" and to disregard the ritual of the Saturday morning hot comb. "In the safe harbor of each other's company they could abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things" (47). Because the outside world is one of threat and rejection, Sula and Nel require each other for survival. Their mothers and grandmothers have made a pact with a world of social obligation and expectation. The girls, however, resist conventional notions of right (Wright) and wrong and social conformity (Peace) to search for mutually satisfying ways of being.

Their explorations are anarchic and destructive on occasion. Two crucial, shocking episodes in the novel confirm the destructive potential of both girls. In both episodes, however, Nel misinterprets Sula's behavior and her own responses. These misinterpretations foreshadow Nel's betrayal of her friend and her climactic realization of this betrayal.

In the first episode, the girls are set upon by a gang of white boys who had tormented Nel on previous afternoons as she walked home from school. Sula pulls out Eva's paring knife, puts down her books, and slashes off the tip of her left forefinger.[8] Raising her eyes to the boys whose attention is rivetted on "the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate," Sula asks, " 'If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?' " (47). Failing to admit to herself that Sula has made this sacrifice for her, Nel thinks that "Sula was so scared she had mutilated herself, to protect herself" (87).

In the second episode, they tease Chicken Little, a little neighborhood boy. The juxtaposition of this episode with the preceding episode suggests the ease with which victim becomes victimizer, for Sula and Nel now take the roles of the tormenters, and they, too, lose control of the situation when the child flies from Sula's swinging arms and drowns in the river before either girl can react. Again, Nel fails to focus on her own complicity. The guilty secret they share binds them closer, though Nel refuses to admit her part in the tragedy until the end of the novel when she recalls feeling pleasantly stimulated by watching Chicken Little fall:

> All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula's frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation. (146)

Although the seeds for Nel's misunderstanding of Sula's motivation and her own are planted when the girls are adolescents, the stability of their friendship withstands outside pressure until Nel marries and becomes one of those who "had folded themselves into starched coffins" (105). Cast by community censure into an opposing role, Sula comes to be regarded by all but Nel with "the most magnificent hatred they [the community] had ever known" (148). The dramatic tension which develops between these two, who were once so close, allows Morrison to indict convention indirectly.

The burden and triumph of the novel is, of course, its implicit challenge of conventional values, symbolized to a large extent by the marriage that drives a wedge between Nel and Sula. Morrison issues this challenge first through her moving depiction of Sula's and Nel's ill-fated friendship and then through her depiction of Sula's brave but futile and impulsive attempt to live like a man. Because she rebels, Sula is Morrison's heroine, though her heroism is depicted as directionless and destructive. Because Nel allows her role as wife to dictate her behavior, she is principally responsible for dissolving their bond. Even in dissolution, however, this bond is primary. Therefore, despite her initial shock when she finds Sula and Jude together, Nel discovers



that "somehow" Sula "didn't look naked" "only [Jude] did" (91). Later, when the numbness subsides, Nel thinks:

> Ooo no, not Sula. Here she was in the midst of it, hating it, scared of it, and again she thought of Sula as though they were still friends and talked things over. That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for. (95)

Though Jude leaves Nel for Sula, Sula won't have him. Taking a bus to Detroit "where he bought but never mailed birthday cards to his sons" (97), he is soon out of reach of community outrage. Sula remains behind, suffering the neighborhood's condemnation and Nel's rejection. "It had surprised and saddened [Sula] a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have" (104). Again, she suffers from Nel's inability to confront her feelings:

> Ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to, . . . [Sula] knew well enough what other women said and felt, or said they felt. But she and Nel had always seen through them. They both knew that those women were not jealous of other women; that they were only afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs. . . . Now Nel was one of *them.* (103)

While Sula fails to comprehend her own potential for sexual possessiveness when she relegates Nel to the company of those hypocritical "others," Morrison seems to confirm Sula's assessment of her friend by echoing Sula's imagery in her description of Nel's adaptation to the role of wife. Caught in a conventional role, like the spider Sula pictures hanging in the strands of its own spinning, Nel discovers that respectability has its cost; marriage has "spun a steady gray web around her heart" (82). Sula's return teaches Nel of the constraint she had begun taking for granted, and she feels "new, soft and new. It had been the longest time since she had had a rib-scraping laugh. She had forgotten how deep and down it could be. So different from the miscellaneous giggles and smiles she had learned to be content with these past few years" (85).

After Nel walks in on Sula and Jude, the web lingers in Nel's consciousness — "A gray ball hovering just there. Just there. To

the right. Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence" (93). This remnant of the web that has shrouded her perceptions remains at the edge of her consciousness until the end. Her refusal to look at it is consistent with her refusal to confront her new-found freedom. Nel closes herself to future sexual commitment, not because she no longer yearns for a man, but because of "what those women said about never looking at another man made some sense to her, for the real point, the heart of what they said, was the word *looked.* Not to promise never to make love to another man, not to refuse to marry another man, but to promise and know that she could never afford to look again . . . (95).

The gulf that develops between Sula and Nel canot be bridged at this point, for their roles and their mutual betrayals have made it impossible for Nel to face what she undoubtedly knows on a deeper level. Therefore although she comes to life again briefly when Sula returns, Nel is outraged by Sula's insistence on her independence. Nel speaks for the community when she tells Sula: " 'You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man' " (123). In describing Sula, Morrison locates the same double standard in the conventional expectations for men and women:

> "[Sula] will do the kinds of things that normally only men do, which is why she's so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman, drops a woman. . . . She's adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared. . . . And she is curious and will leave and try anything. . . So that quality of masculinity — and I mean this in the pure sense — in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage."[9]

"Lying at death's door still smart talking" (122), Sula asserts that being a woman and " 'colored' " is the same as being a man. Having learned early what it is to be not white and not male, Sula has willed sexual equality for herself and decided to go " 'down like one of the redwoods' " (123). " 'I sure did live in this world' " (123), she says to Nel.

The epigraph to the novel suggests an ironic parallel between Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo,* who sees her love destroyed and



indicts her community since it doesn't "want glory like that in nobody's heart,"[10] and Sula, whose mercuric individuality is symbolized by a rose birthmark which darkens in color as she ages. The varied responses of others in the community to Sula's birthmark measure the distance betwen Sula's dynamic personality and conventional expectations for young women. Sula's mystery cannot be fathomed by any but Nel who is unwilling to risk the possibility of being lost as Sula is lost.

Morrison emphasizes rather than ignores the threat that everyone but Nel perceives in Sula. By conflating images, she reveals both Sula's honesty and her menace. In a frightening episode that casts demonic reflections on Sula's character, Morrison stresses Sula's inability to feel as convention demands and her unwillingness to lie to hide this inability. Drifting into death, Sula remembers watching Hannah, her mother, burn to death and recalls, "I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing" (127). Sula's detachment from the horror of this scene underlines her emotional separation from a mother who admitted that she loved Sula but did not like her (49).

Sula also feels no closeness to her grandmother, Eva, and only bows to Nel's sense of duty by permitting her to send money to the home to which she (Sula) has had Eva committed. Eva's involuntary commitment outrages the community, but protects Sula from the fate of Plum, the son, Eva burned to death in an attempt to allow him a death befitting a man (62). Eva's rigid views of appropriate roles for men and women emerge in this violent, but loving, act and in her concern that Sula live a conventional life. Thus, despite the sustaining hatred she feels for her own long-gone husband, Boy Boy, and her knowledge that dreams of weddings prefigure death (67), Eva asks Sula, " 'When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you' " (80). Sula, however, knows from watching her mother and grandmother how little men actually count in the scheme of things, insists on her independence, and laughs at Eva's assertion that " 'woman got no business floatin' around without no man.' " " 'Whatever's burning in me is mine!' " (80), Sula shouts and signs the papers to send her grandmother to a home.

The female casualties to the rigid roles Eva and the neighborhood revere are legion. They are old before their time, bruised and toothless — "The years have dusted their bronze with ash" (105). The male casualties to these rôles — Plum, Tar Baby (a white alcoholic who boards at Eva's house), the three Deweys (young boys Eva adopts and gives identical names presumably because she believes all males are or should be alike), and Shadrack (a shell shock victim and founder of National Suicide Day)— amplify Morrison's attack on convention.

The most important of these, Shadrack becomes a man without an identity. "Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917" (6), Shadrack fights J. P. Morgan's war and finds himself at twenty-two "old, weak, . . . frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't know who or what he was . . . with not past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do . . ." (10). In founding National Suicide Day, his idiosyncratic, unintentional parody of Veterans' Day and other conventional celebrations of individual sacrifice exacted by war, Shadrack issues a mad call to the Bottom to regularize and control murder by devoting one day a year to it. Shadrack's bell becomes "part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio" (14). Finally, in the months before Pearl Harbor, he finds followers when a comic procession of members of the community form a "pied piper's band" (137) and troop to icy death in an uncompleted, unstable tunnel. Impelled by a need to believe in miracles, those who join in the parade share a common hope —

> the same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers; kept them from finally leaving as they talked of doing; kept them knee-deep in other people's wars; kept them solicitous of white people's children; kept them convinced that some magic "government" was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars. (137)

These vain hopes are shared by those who, like Shadrack, become markers in the novel for fatal conformity. Among the



first to join his band are the Deweys, whose stunted lives are the result of such conformity. Unable to survive separation despite their different ages and ethnic backgrounds, the Deweys play chain-gang with their shoe-laces knotted together in the early part of the novel. At Nel's wedding, it is discovered that they will never grow taller than their forty-eight inches:

> The realization was based on the fact that they remained boys in mind. Mischievous, cunning, private and completely unhousebroken, their games and interests had not changed since Hannah had them all put into the first grade together. (73)

Denied individuality and the personal space in which to grow, the Deweys, in their extreme conformity, provide a total contrast to Sula, who discovers "that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought . . ." (104). In contrast to the once vital friendship that sustained Sula and Nel, the perpetual, personality-obliterating, mutual dependency of the Deweys finds social acceptance. In contrast to the friendship between Sula and Nel, a friendship which promoted growth and independent identities for both women, Sula's passion for Ajax and Nel's marriage to Jude culminate in physical and emotional death. When Sula dies after her attempt to know Ajax has failed just as her earlier attempt to make Nel understand failed, the dormant love of Nel for Sula survives long after Jude and Ajax are vague memories. Finally, Nel acknowledges this love, confronting the tragedy of a betrayal beyond remedy.

Since this betrayal has blighted Nel's life, Morrison treats Nel's failure to understand herself and Sula provisionally. But she is less charitable to the community which has feared and hated Sula as a "witch" (129) and which celebrates rather than mourns her death; for without Sula, the community finds that the center will not hold:

> A falling away, a dislocation was taking place. Hard on the heels of the general relief that Sula's death brought, a restless irritability took hold. . . . mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mother from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension

> was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair. Daughters who had complained bitterly of taking care of their aged mothers-in-law had altered when Sula locked Eva away, and they began cleaning those old women's spittoons without a murmur. Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. And even those Negroes who moved down from Canada to Medallion, who remarked every chance they got that they had never been slaves, felt a loosening of the reactionary compassion for Southern-born blacks Sula had inspired in them. They returned to their original claims of superiority. (131-32)

Ironically and appropriately, without Sula the community disintegrates. She, who asserted that "doing anything forever and ever was hell" (93) while she lived, provided a stay against encroaching white values. But with her death the possibility for productive, humane change in the Bottom vanishes. Looking back at a time, now beyond recovery, Nel experiences the loss of the possibility for a fuller life than convention allots to women. Things seem "better" from the vantage point of 1965 — the opportunities for women are certainly greater — however the "young people [have] a look about them that everybody said was new but which remind[s] Nel of the Deweys, whom nobody had ever found" (140).

With the perspective provided by the quarter of a century which separates her from Sula, dead at thirty, a middle-aged Nel looks back and sees how little remains of the family she sacrificed herself and Sula to defend. She and Eva, Sula's institutionalized grandmother, are all that survives of the old order. Each has nothing but memories of children who are gone or who no longer remember the sacrifices their mothers have made. Eva, occupying one of the "sterile green cages" (143) which house the old folks in the newly built "home," perseveres in her ritual ironing — "She had neither iron nor clothes but did not stop her fastidious lining up of pleats or pressing out of wrinkles . . ." (144). Nel has resigned herself to her constricted world and a love for her boys, now grown and gone, which is "like a pan of



syrup kept too long on the stove, . . . cooked out, leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off" (142).

Nel visits Eva, but doesn't stay long. There is much to say, but little good will between them despite (or perhaps because) of the similarity of their situations. It has been twenty-five years since Sula's death, but Nel has still failed to confront the meaning of the loss. Fleeing from Eva's accusations about Chicken Little's death, Nel relives her response to Sula's unattended funeral; the furry web that has been suspended at the edge of her consciousness breaks and scatters "like dandelion spores in the breeze" (149), and she howls her loss:

> "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." (149)

Nel's personal loss reverberates. "Loud and long . . . [with] . . . no bottom and . . . no top," her cry commemorates a universal loss of the intense, usually unacknowledged, certainly unheralded, first friendship of one woman for another, a friendship, perhaps, more dangerous in its implications than Sula's solitary rebellion. In *Sula*, Morrison iluminates the power and fragility of such bonds between women. Through her luminous characterizations of both Sula and Nel, who learn too late the primacy of their bond, Morrison suggests that our betrayal of each other is also a betrayal of self. Transcending the death of Sula and the death in life of Nel, the vision Morrison creates of their ill-fated friendship urges us to be more conscious of and more concerned about the sacrifices of love and human potential exacted by a sexist, racist social order.

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NOTES

1. John Oliver Killens, *The Cotillion, or One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (New York: Trident Press, 1971), p. 199.
2. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 102. All subsequent references to *Sula* are noted parenthetically in the text of this essay.
3. Robert B. Stepto, " 'Intimate Things in Place': A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Massachusetts Review* 28, pp. 486-87.

4. Quoted in Margo Jefferson, "Passionate and Precise," *Ms*, December 1974, p. 34. Morrison adds, "We had no crutches and no models. I wrote *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* because I wanted to read them."
5. Stepto, pp. 486-87.
6. Louise Bernikow;, *Among Women* (New York: Harmony Books, 1980), p. 55.
7. Barbara Smith discusses the erotic romanticism which suffuses Nel's and Sula's adolescent relationship and calls attention to the complementarity of Nel's and Sula's fantasies in "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 2(1979).
8. The meaning of Sula's passionate gesture is confirmed by an amputation suffered by her grandmother who sacrifices her leg in a train accident in order to feed her family on the compensation money.
9. Stepto, p. 487.
10. Serafina feels that she is being persecuted by her community because of the perfect love she shared with her philandering husband. In contrast to Sula, Serafina is the ideal wife of convention, though her husband is less than the ideal husband she deserves.

# THE TERRA FIRMA OF HARRIETTE ARNOW'S FICTION

PAULINE ADAMS AND EMMA S. THORNTON

The critical platitude regarding fiction posits that a great novel harmoniously blends plot, character, and setting. In the works of some successful novelists who achieve this harmony, the dimensions of character and setting are an outgrowth of plot. In other successful works, plot and setting are an outgrowth of the powerful development of character. In Harriette Arnow's work, though she calls herself "a simple storyteller, nothing more," story and characters grow organically from the setting. She is not always successful, but when she is, she is very, very successful. However, she can fail, and when she does, it is that failure to grow from the setting that is the source of her failure. By setting, it is important to include not only place and time, but language and custom — at least when discussing Arnow's work. All these elements are rooted in her own life experience. When her life experience is scanty or more removed, her novels similarly fail to achieve the wholeness implicit in her best works.

Harriette Simpson was born in the Cumberland region of South-central Kentucky in 1908. Her parents were school teachers who abandoned that profession out of economic desperation. The father took an office job in Burnside, Kentucky, but the family, all six children plus parents, lived on a hill above that river town. The child Harriette loved the out-of-doors. Her hillside world, with its rocks and trees and wildflowers and changing skies nourished her. Her imagination absorbed it all. Her imagination also fed on "the stories of the 'old days'" told by parents, grandparents, and neighbors, and it was these stories that bred in her "a sense of belonging, and curiosity . . . those old stories have

lived with me all my life."[1] Harriette then attended Berea College for a miserable two years (1924-1926). After this unpleasant interlude, she taught in a rural school (Pulaski County) for the next two years. Then, off she went to the University of Louisville where she received the B.A. in 1930. Her study of geology and botany reinforced her informal gathering of knowledge from the world she knew and loved.

Graduation was followed by a three-year stint as Junior High teacher in Louisville and a summer waitress job at the Conway Inn in Petosky, Michigan. For the first time her roots spread beyond Kentucky, and it was in Petosky, in one of the vacant cottages after the tourist season ended, that she started writing her first novel. In 1934, Arnow decided to leave teaching and devote herself to writing, meantime supporting herself by a daytime waitress job in Cincinnati. During that period, she published several short stories and her first novel, *Mountain Path* (1936). In 1939 she married Harold Arnow, newspaperman, and by 1941, her first child was born. The family moved to a wartime housing project in Detroit in 1944 when Harold Arnow got a job on the *Detroit Times*. By 1951, the family (which now included two children) moved to a small farm near Ann Arbor. But in the interim, in 1949, Macmillan published *Hunter's Horn*, her second novel. Within five years, the third novel, *The Dollmaker*, was published. Almost as if she felt that she had completed her fictional statement, she turned away from the novel to social history in her next two books: *Seedtime on the Cumberland* and *Flowering of the Cumberland* — repositories of the homely and historical detail of that region for the period 1780-1803. Deeply affected by the events of the 1950's and 1960's, Arnow returned to fiction to make her own statement in *The Weedkiller's Daughter* (1970). Then, within four years she turned back her literary clock to the Revolutionary War period in her most recent novel, *Kentucky Trace* (1974). Her latest book returns to a social history of her childhood locale, *Old Burnside* (1978).

Arnow still lives in Ann Arbor. She still returns to Kentucky. She summer vacations, frequently alone, in Nova Scotia. She still writes, and just recently, during a visit to East Lansing, she spoke of the writer's familiar pain of tearing up 600 pages of the first draft of her current work.



Two novels, in particular, attest to Arnow's literary superiority. In *Hunter's Horn* and *The Dollmaker*, the organic quality of all the elements and details relate authentically; the reader, like the author, becomes a participant. Though setting is the present focus, this is not to overlook the fact that Arnow draws on a great reservoir of human understanding from which her characters come to life as do their ordinary, thus universal, experiences. Raymond Carver wrote aptly regarding the art of fiction, that each writer, to be effective, must express a "unique and exact way of looking at things, and . . . the right context for expressing that way of looking."[2] In these two novels, Arnow found her "exact way."

*Hunter's Horn* takes place in a remote valley of the Little Smokey Creek Country of the Cumberland region of Kentucky. The time span is October 1939 to Spring 1942. Though there is a passing, oblique reference to Pearl Harbor[3] and occasional references to the WPA and AAA, the story is timeless and could easily have been written about the Ballew family in 1839. This fact speaks to the essence of life in those Appalachian nooks as long as they remained isolated: — time was not measured by clocks or even by centuries, but by the parade of seasons and days. Arnow captures that parade from sense experience and memory. Note, for example, this description of the sights, sounds, and smells of nature in the fall as Nunnelly Ballew, the protagonist, experiences them.

> The sun rose higher and took away the chill of early morning fog: the sandy soil, from being damp, grew pleasantly warm through his shoes, and from the steep wooded bluff and hillside above came the smell of wild grapes, overripe now and drying in the sun, of horsemint dried and gone to seed, and the odor of damp, freshly fallen leaves beginning their slow change into earth, a smell that always made Nunn think of fox fire on rainy nights and rotten moss-covered logs.
>
> All these and the smell of the freshly cut corn fodder were pleasant things, like the sight of the wild sunflowers glowing in the sun along the river, the river itself, blue and sprinkled with red and yellow leaves; and the red and white striped morning-glories that bloomed among the corn,

> only now the flowers were beginning to wilt, each with a pearl of dew caught in its throat; it seemed a sin on this blue-and-gold morning to kill the pretty things as he cut the dead corn they grew by.
>
> The river, higher than on most falls, gurgled softly over the shoals; and in the little space of time between carrying an armload of fodder to the shock and walking back to cut more, when the rustling of the corn was silent, all the little sounds lost on a windy day, but loud now in the stillness, came to him: a peckerwood working on a dead beech limb in the bluff above; the *plop, plop* of his shoes in the sandy soil; the twittering of the wild canaries as they bounced among the sunflowers; the rustling whisper of a sycamore leaf as it settled after a slow sliding fall against the earth; the buzz of a few late-hunting bees among the asters; and on the bluff side above him now and again the chattering of a squirrel — on some still damp morning he ought to go squirrel hunting. Back in the mines when he came dirty at dawn from the night shift, he'd think of the fog-wetted woods in the valley and of how he had squirrel-hunted as a boy and how he would again when he bought the Old Place — the years had gone now and he never had." (H, p. 320)

This description requires nothing more. Its tone harmonizes the details of fall into a natural whole. The reader, though a stranger, enters and walks in Nunnelly's world.

Arnow's sensitivity to all the elements of life about her extends to animals. Not only dogs, not only foxes, but also cows, mules, and sheep have individual characteristics and lead individual lives. This reflects the author's ease and familiarity not only with animals, but with those who live intimately with them. It is not the author's attempt to be cute or quaint.

Log houses were always important in Kentucky. Arnow recalls from her own past that log houses were "always curiously alive with a way all [their] own"; this may account for the meticulous rendition of them in all her Kentucky novels.

*Hunter's Horn* revolves around the obsession of Nunnelly Ballew to hunt a wily red fox — King Devil — in the time-honored way. According to custom, it is the hound who runs down the fox, and the hound who kills the fox. The owners of the dogs hunt vicariously through their hounds, and the sense of victory enjoyed by the owner of the victorious hound surpasses even that of his animal. Man and dog are "champion." In the course of this several-year hunt, all that Nunnelly loves — his family (his wife and five children), and his farm — are deprived of his needed attention. Nothing really matters but the getting of King Devil by his pampered pedigreed fox hounds, the envy of the countryside. At the end, King Devil is killed by those very hounds — and instead of the incarnation of evil, King Devil turns out to be a vixen about to whelp at the moment of her death. With that death, Nunn's obsession subsides, and he returns to the quiet but demanding farm life of his forebears. His return is too late to help Suse, his eldest, and he would claim, cherished daughter, whose dream of high school and escape from the valley is sacrificed to her father's obsession.



The speech of Arnow's characters rolls off her pen as naturally as the words from the mouths of the real people who are their kin. Their yard goods are "flowerdy," not flowery; "diddles," not chickens, dash all over the farm yard; children suffer from "tizic," not asthma, while older people are "rheumaticky"; women have not time to pretty themselves and so are often "scraggeldy"; though this does not prevent them from regularly "getting bigged." In that valley, it is the rare dwelling that boasts of "house plunder," or household furnishings. Children often make a "gome," or mess; women must guard their language though they are allowed "shit-fire."

That hill country is alive with superstition. "A bird in the house was a certain sign of death," and people are careful not "to bring a hoe into the house for that would bring trouble" (H, p. 268). Children are told that babies sprout "from toenails planted . . and grow until a granny woman found them and carried them to some sick woman sick in bed" (H, p. 385).

These granny women are midwives and doctors to a region bereft of any other kind of medical help. Sue Annie, in *Hunter's Horn,* is the granny woman of Ballew Hollow, and a wise and independent and earthy person is she. She is a walking pharmacopeia and has a ready cure for most of the health problems that

arise in the valley. For example, young Doddie Cramer suffers from the following treatment at her hands when Sue Annie discovers he is wasting away from worms.

First, he is fed "shredded wormseed in warmed molasses and sulphur." Then, "a bit of cotton oozing with turpentine [is wrapped] around his navel to make the worms start down." Around his chest, Sue Annie lays "a warmed flannel cloth dipped in a mixture of melted lard, turpentine, and coal oil." While so wrapped, Sue Annie places "rosin pills on Doddie's tongue." After a while, he is forced to drink feverweed tea made from "life everlasting, sweet fennel, ratbane, feverweed." At the proper moment, the soles of Doddie's feet and the palms of his hands are "greased with a mixture of hog's jawbone marrow and mutton tallow." Under his armpits is placed "a poultice of mashed, roasted onions" while Doddie is periodically administered spoonsful of "an especially strong mixture of feverweed and black seneca." This treatment, which required a seven-page (H, pp. 371-78) description in the novel, worked.

In *Hunter's Horn,* the characters come very much alive not because Arnow deftly probes their psychological stirrings or because she becomes the omniscient author who knows all about the characters she has created. Rather, they are a part of the fundament, an outgrowth of their land, so minutely observed by Arnow; they grow from their ancestors, so often referred to and remembered by each block in the great stone fireplace and by each marker in the cemetery; they are molded by their folkways, and so, in turn, they mold their children. Arnow is never again so successful with a male character as she is with Nunn Ballew in this book. His is only one point of view from which the story is told. We also see events from the point of view of Milly, Nunn's wife, and from that of their daughter, Suse.

The story is simple yet universal. It is this universality that lifts *Hunter's Horn* beyond the genre of local color. It is the story of one man's obsessional quest and its impact on all around him. The quest arises naturally from the small world wherein these people reside.

*The Dollmaker,* perhaps even more than *Hunter's Horn,* illustrates Arnow's genius at integrating place, time, language, and



custom with a story and the people. Most briefly stated this is a story of the traumas of adjustment experienced by a Kentucky hill-country woman and her family when they move to Detroit.

Gertie Nevels, her husband and five children, barely scrape out an existence as tenant farmers in the Kentucky hills in the early 1940's. They have no electricity, running water, or plumbing. Their community offers only occasional schooling and mail delivery. But Gertie loves the land and farming. Secretly hoarding pennies, she dreams of owning her own farm; she resents sharing half her crops with the land owner. Reuben, her 12-year-old son, shares her dream; but Clovis, her husband, chooses a different life. Money and the chance to work with machines lure him to Detroit where he can simultaneously fulfill his "patriotic duty." Gertie, torn between her dream and what is impressed on her as her "duty" — impressed by her mother — reluctantly joins Clovis. The time is fall 1944; the story ends the following fall. Clovis works in a factory. The family abode is a crowded housing project where things of nature are not. Four of the five children go to school. Gertie, who in Kentucky had been the pivot around which family and sustenance revolved, is a lost soul. She is too large in body for the tiny rooms; she is too ignorant of city ways to deal with everyday institutions of schools, grocery stores, telephones, hospitals, police, to say nothing of dealing with the intense interactions of crowded multiethnic neighborhoods. Yet she manages to relate to individual neighbors, becoming a babysitter and laundress for one, a listening ear for another, a provider of dreams for a third. Despite these new human contacts, her family relationships deteriorate. She, who had been the pivot becomes an encumbrance. Reuben no longer trusts her after she unwittingly fails him, and he runs away, returning to Kentucky. Six-year-old Cassie, child of Gertie's creative/imaginative self, is killed by a train. Clytie and Enoch barely tolerate Gertie's "hill-billy" ways as they quickly adjust to their new lives. Clovis, ineffectual but kindly in Kentucky, becomes irritable and vindictive, ridden by debt and fearful of unemployment in Detroit. He turns more and more to other men for fellowship and information. Throughout, wood-carving, "whittlin' foolishness" Gertie self-deprecatingly calls it, remains her passion, her creative outlet, her catharsis, her escape from

the world. She craves "to bring out from the block of cherry wood" she had lugged from home a Christ-Judas figure. In addition, she carves dolls and crucifixes and animal figures for sale. Though she holds on to the dream of returning to Kentucky to buy her own farm, by the end of the book we know she will not. Though the initial traumas of adjustment are behind her, new requirements arise daily, but now Gertie recognizes she can live with those requirements; life has possibilities. Gertie is resuming her central role in her family.

In each place of being: natural valley farm, unnatural alley housing project, the details of setting — time, language, custom, terra firma — all interweave to make that place of being.

The life in Kentucky informs us, as it forms Gertie, both on cognitive and emotional levels through its being rooted in nature and in elemental things. Detroit rips out the roots of living things and replaces them with telephone poles, sterile dirt, concrete, and factories belching fire and smoke. Nature is Gertie's touchstone. She has to see the north star to know where she is, and she is lost when bright lights blot it out. She has to hear the rain on the roof to connect with the world and feels cut off when the modern construction of the Detroit housing project silences the rain.

Gertie feels a particular awareness (and we along with her) of anything beautiful; she conversely feels a heightened revulsion to ugliness wherever found. The depth of the elemental understanding of this conflict between beauty and ugliness, given distinctive tone by realistic detail, marks both this author's basic resources and her literary skill. Ugliness of life in Detroit is experienced on many levels.

All the aspects of setting we have noted come in for a jarring effect on Gertie in that place called Merry Hill. The place: noisy, crowded, always dirty, fearsome even, with paper-thin walls. Time runs by clocks, deadlines, schedules, demands. Customs respond to advertising, installment buying, subsequent debt. Bought one day, broken the next, thrown away even before paid for. The strains of ancestral folkways are a multi-tongued cacophony of Irish, Polish, German, Italian, Japanese — whatever — a social "gome" incomprehensible, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and religiously indigestible — so it seemed.



The ugliness confronts Gertie through *things*. Clovis buys on installment a Christmas gift for Gertie, an Icy Heart refrigerator. It is the envy of her neighbors, but to Gertie it seems to be a Merry Hill horror, crowding her kitchen still more; its operation causes a distressing Christmas scene. "The real butter, that was to have been a Christmas treat with hot biscuit, had got so hard and cold from its stay in the Icy Heart that it refused to melt even on the hottest of biscuit, and butter and biscuit were chilled together. Clytie had the lettuce in the wrong place, and it was frozen. Reuben complained the milk was so cold it hurt his teeth. Clytie blamed it on Enoch, who'd turned down the cold controls; Enoch was angry; and Clovis turned sorrowful because the Icy Heart, like Cassie's new doll and the other things he'd bought, was unappreciated."[4]

Gertie's only private, personal renewal is found in the few minutes she can spend handling and carving wood. But, when the small objects are admired, and she starts to make them one-by-one for sale, Clovis, profit-oriented, presents her with a jig-saw so that the rough work of cutting can be speeded up and objects produced more rapidly. Reluctantly, Gertie surrenders to mass production. When her son, Enoch, suggests they get scrap-wood to make dolls and crosses on the jig-saw, "Gertie hesitated; she didn't think she'd ever use the ugly little thing; it was like a monster from some fairy tale that, instead of grinding salt, spewed ugliness into the world." Yet, Gertie mass produces dolls and paints them "ugly, too bright colors" . . . "ugliness on the pretty, fine-grained maple wood. The work of producing ugliness was worse than the sneezy stinking job of getting off old paint" (D, p. 501).

Night-time brings Gertie no surcease from the ugly reality of Detroit life. "Tonight was no better than other nights. She lay rigidly still, inviting sleep, but it would not come. Half her mind wondered how soon the alarm would go off. The other half listened to the wind or, in the spells of silences between the sob and shriek of it, the night sounds of the city, lonelier seeming than by day, as if she lived in a world where nothing else lived.

If in the silence she could hear the creek over rocks, the wind in living trees, the bark of a fox, the cry of a screech owl — anything alive, not dead like the clock and the Icy Heart" (D, pp. 326-327).

Even more distressing and overwhelming is the fear of the larger machine world. "Detroit was another name for Hell." *The Dollmaker* postulates that industrialism is demoniacally antihuman, excreting violence and ugliness. We witness, for example, industrial strife turning the usually gentle Clovis into a premeditated murderer. After the bubble gum boy's mother is squashed to death by the press she operated, we, together with Gertie, learn of the many ways a worker can die:

> . . . burned, crushed, skinned alive, smothered, gassed, electrocuted, chopped to bits, blown to pieces. She heard tales of the ways of loose bolts or old belts with human arms, legs, and heads. She listened to stories of machines on speed-up that, unable to bear the speed as did the men, flew with no warning into flying pieces of steel that blinded and crippled when they didn't kill. A fast turning wheel or milling machine wasn't like a man; it wouldn't just fall down on the floor peaceable-like when it passed out the way a man would. (D, p. 318)

Though everything in this novel is seen only through Gertie's eyes, she is so discerning an observer, so sensitive a fellow human being, so much a part of her environment that the reader does not feel deprived even when he or she is incompletely informed about particular events. Indeed, the magic is that the reader becomes more deeply involved than would have been possible had the point of view been that of the omniscient author.

We come now to *Mountain Path*, Arnow's first novel. Here she did not achieve the natural fruition of her talent as she later did in *Hunter's Horn* and *The Dollmaker*. Nevertheless, *Mountain Path* already possessed many of the strengths of her later success. *Mountain Path* also takes place in the remote hill country of the Cumberland in the late 1920's. A young school teacher, Louisa, comes from Lexington to teach in a one-room school for a seven-month school year from July to February. The community is untouched by cars, trains, radios, electricity, plumbing, modern medicine, clocks, newspapers. It is touched, overwhelmed is more like it, by farm work, superstition, lethal family feuds, moonshining. Louisa, boarding with one of the more prosperous families of the region, consciously determines that for the seven months of her stay, her role will be that of "the bystander, nothing more." Since we see everything through her eyes, our view is somewhat limited. Yet, we are drawn more and more into the lives of the people and the natural rhythms of the valley because Louisa, despite her resolve, is observant and curious, and she begins to fall in love with Chris Bledsoe, nephew of her hosts. Chris is hiding from the law because he killed a man to avenge his own brother's murder.



The story of *Mountain Path* is superficially more dramatic than are the stories of Arnow's two great novels. It tells of moonshining in hidden caves, ghost fiddlers, deadly family feuds that end in still more death. Chris, himself, dies, another victim in the never-ending cycle of murder that must be avenged. At the end of her seven-month contract, Louisa leaves the valley forever. She has learned much in that short period of time. She has learned from Corie Calhoun, the wife of her host family, "gratefulness and thankfulness."[5] She has learned that "It was not wrong to make good whiskey, and no law could make it wrong. Always they had made it; the Bledsoes, and the Andersons, and the Calhouns. She saw that they would continue to make it. Nothing could stop them, as nothing could stop them from hunting without a license or killing each other when they saw reason to kill. In twenty years or sooner, Pete and Lander [six-year-old boys] would still here in the cave just as their fathers did" (M, p. 124). She has learned about apple drying and molasses making. She has grown accustomed to dinners of "milk and coffee, cornbread, green beans, pickles and sow belly, huckleberry jam sweetened with molasses" (M, p. 51). The bystander leaves the valley, but the valley never leaves Louisa-cum-Arnow. Her many books are testimony.

The novel is crammed with detail, but the wonderful wholeness of place, character, and story that grace *Hunter's Horn* and *The Dollmaker* is less evident here. The same can be said of

Arnow's latest novel, *Kentucky Trace.* This novel takes place in 1780. The protagonist is Leslie Collins, son of a planter, an adventurer, surveyor, and supporter of the revolutionary cause. The story centers around his search for his wife — a search which takes him into the wilderness of the Cumberland area of Kentucky. During the course of his search he meets all manner of people: captured British soldiers, outlaw bands of horsethieves, a lost Indian, a runaway Boston wife who is camped in the wilderness with her new-born baby and slave servant, a saltpeter maker who works with the niter dirt in the caves along the river. Again, the physical setting is beautifully evoked; and again, the day-to-day details of life are carefully presented: how to make a shoepac (we call them mocassins), how to bake bread (Cherokee style), how to make saltpeter, recipes for Indian remedies. Arnow also includes specific allusions to the historical events of that time and place — footnotes to the history of the Revolutionary War. For example, the Point Pleasant Campaign, the Battle of King's Mountain, the various battles of Vincennes, the Overmountain men who settled on Cherokee hunting grounds and then proceeded to wipe out the Cherokees in 1778. Despite this authenticity of setting, the story and characters are more precariously rooted in this novel than in the others. The events of the story appear, at times, contrived and the characters seem to be consciously set into their places to play roles. They are not believable as living, breathing beings. It is as if Arnow deliberately took material she gathered in *Seedtime on the Cumberland* and *Flowering of the Cumberland* and set out to make those people and events real. Yet, the story is interesting and the novel instructive.

Finally, *The Weedkiller's Daughter,* unlike all the others, treats not Kentucky or its hill people, but rather centers on Susan, an alienated fifteen-year old, in an ambitious, social climbing, middle-class family in a late 1960's Detroit suburb. Everything is seen from Susan's point of view. Thus, her father — she calls him Bismark — a rigid, bigotted, nature-hating owner of a plastics factory, is completely dehumanized; he is as synthetic as the products he manufactures. The mother, whom Susan calls "the popsicle queen," is a wife, frightened of her husband. She reacts more to the social pressures of those around her than to any principles or feelings of her own. Susan's married older sister is a carbon-copy of her mother, and Susan's younger brother is a grossly fat, embryonic Nazi.



Susan is not only alienated from her immediate family but from her social environment as well — from school, from her country that has allowed McCarthyite harassment, the Vietnam War, and environmental destruction. She does relate positively to some of her more sensitive classmates, to her politically conscious grandmother, and to some of her more distant but more "human" relatives. Susan's immediate goal is to survive so that she can attain her long-range goal to move to Canada and become a doctor. By the end of the book, her survival seems assured.

Arnow pays her customary attention to detail. Perhaps she is trying to create the artificial atmosphere that Susan senses in her world, or perhaps out of failure to fully grasp the milieu that she is trying to present, Arnow's setting is less well-rooted in this world than is true of her other works. When she deals with nature, as in the description of the pond, a place of refuge for Susan, and in the masterful description of sailing on the Detroit River during a storm, a fully recognizable world emerges.

In contrast, the descriptions of the house in which Susan lives, and of her family living in that house, while loaded with exact detail, fail to convince the reader of any reality. One may wonder — is it Susan's mind that sees her home this way? Is it the author's highly stereotypical rendition of middle-class tastes and people? Is it the author's attempt to superimpose a surrealistic distortion on a real but changing natural world? One example, only, may suggest the surrealistic distortion that invades these pages now and again: Susan's mother, trapped in her own pattern of social necessity, is seen by Susan as "the Popsicle Queen."

> The woman's hair is an arrangement of lemon popsicles. Her eyes are shavings of blueberry popsicles. Her cheeks are painted plastic lilies in the graveyard six months after the funeral. Her voice is the tinkling of glass from the five-and-ten. Her body is teflon coated.
>
> She is not always the Popsicles Queen. Mornings very early her face is a frozen pizza, a very old one, so long left unsold the round salami have turned from pink to gray, the cheese

> is yellow-gray, and the frozen dough is the gray of blue toilet paper, unflushed in the toilet bowl. Other times the face is a frozen pizza dropped from a shopping bag and stepped on in the store by many feet.[6]

For whatever reason, Arnow did not completely succeed in blending the realistic with the surrealistic in crafting her setting. Consequently, her characters do not naturally arise from this chaotic background. There is a sense of place lost. The unity of her works, which is her hallmark, is never fully attained. It was an experiment that did not completely succeed. Arnow is not a moralist, yet one senses that all her sympathies are for the anti-Joseph McCarthy, anti-bourgeois materialism, anti-Vietnam war attitudes of her protagonist, Susan. However, since that protagonist never really comes alive in a believable world, the reader finds it hard to take either Susan or her beliefs in these issues seriously.

Arnow considers herself a realist and rightfully so because when she sticks to the real world as she knows it, she is in top form. As Hershell Brickell commented about *Hunter's Horn,* she seems to write "as effortlessly as a bird sings, and the warmth, the beauty, the sadness and the ache of life itself are not even once absent from her pages."[7] When she enters a different world as she did in *Kentucky Trace* or introduces a surrealistic dimension, as she did in *The Weedkiller's Daughter,* her books no longer recreate a place, a time, a people, a story. Though skillfully written, they do not remain with the reader.

Vladimir Nabokov, in a lecture on literature, counseled the reader of fiction, "caress the details, the divine details." One cannot read Arnow's works without caressing the details, the devine details out of which she recreates her people's stories.

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NOTES

1. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Some Musings on the Nature of History.* The Clarence M. Burton Memorial Lecture, delivered on October 18, 1968 at the Michigan Museum Conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Reprinted in pamphlet form, p. 3.
2. Raymond Carver, "A Storyteller's Shoptalk," *New York Times Book Review,* February 15, 1981, p. 9.



3. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Hunter's Horn* (New York:Macmillan, 1949), p. 394. All subsequent references to this novel will be noted within the text as follows: (H, p. —).
4. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *The Doll Maker* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), p. 288. All subsequent references to this novel will be noted within the text as follows: (D, p. —).
5. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Mountain Path* (Berea, Kentucky: Council of the Southern Mountain Publishers, 1936), p. 215. All subsequent references to this novel will be noted within the text as follows: (M, p. —).
6. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *The Weedkiller's Daughter* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), p. 6.
7. Herschel Brickell, Review of *Hunter's Horn, New York Times,* May 29, 1949, p. 4.

# EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE EGO: EVA IN "TELL ME A RIDDLE"

SARA CULVER

And if a blight kill not a tree but it still bear fruit, let none say that the fruit was in consequence of the blight.[1]

Fruit from a blighted tree will always be sparse. Tillie Olsen's collceted works weigh lightly in one hand, yet they weigh more heavily in the mind than many more luxuriant volumes.

Her fiction, a rich trove from a gift "nursed through the night," cherished and preserved against the forces that could have killed it — motherhood in straitened circumstances — retains some of the bleakness where it had to endure. It is remarkably condensed. In "Tell Me A Riddle" she sketches an entire life in fifty-three pages; she writes as if she were distilling the experiences from a crucible in her own body.

This story reveals the depth of wasture which results from using as a servant and breeding machine a woman whose intellect, courage and idealism served only to make her painfully aware of the distance between her life as it was lived, and her life as it could have been lived. Gifts that rot unused in the bearer breed poisonous resentment and the bitterness that seeps up through the surface of daily life is a residue that destroys the soul.

Tillie Olsen's protagonists are frustrated in their expression of artistic or intellectual gifts, people whose lives are blighted by poverty, racism, ignorance, or all of these. What she shows in her vignettes is how all people's lives are made even poorer by this blighting of intellectual capacity in women. While in *Silences* she takes issue with those who say that women aren't well represented in the arts because there are very few talented women,





in her fiction she does not deal with such luxuries as artistic creation. Her women — in *Yonnondio*, in "I Stand Here Ironing," and in "Tell Me a Riddle" — all battle for mere survival. The question of artistic creation never arises. The struggle to maintain their children's bodies demands all the women's effort; the luxury in this bleak world is to give their children love and understanding. The only other writer who comes to mind as having portrayed the reality of grinding necessity so vividly is James Agee. It is impossible to read *Let Us Now Praise Famous* Men and come away mouthing platitudes about the possibility of choice being open to all. Olsen, in much terser vein, does the same thing for mothers.

In *Silences*, Olsen points out that the German poet, Raina Maria Rilke, would not come to his own daughter's wedding because it interfered with his writing time. History forgives him his choice, but when a woman leaves her children to the care of a father or grandparents, she become a monster. For a woman to leave her children is considered at best, extremely irresponsible and selfish, and at worst, criminal. The fact that a man can leave his family, as did the father in "I Stand Here Ironing" without being considered either a madman or a criminal, makes it obvious that a man has a wider range of options open to him, even after fatherhood, than does a woman after motherhood. While even poor men who have become fathers are at liberty to dispose of their lives as they wish, poor women who become mothers are not. And women, especially in the past, have been made responsible for lives whose presence has not been wholly a matter of choice on their part.

There have been a multitude of commentators about those women who neglect their children for art or intellectual pursuits or who (selfishly) fail to produce children in order to pursue their private careers. What isn't very often shown is the blight on children whose mothers fail to bring forth the intellectual and artistic harvest within themselves.

Olsen shows us this side of the coin. She shows how spiritually impoverished the children must be whose mothers have no legacy of accomplishment in the wider world to leave them, whose lives have been squeezed away in the wringer of necessity,

whose words are unspoken or unheard. The mothers who have never had a chance to experience a wider world than their families can rarely bequeath to their children a kind of wisdom that will serve them beyond the narrow boundaries of self. If they have acquired such wisdom, it is often despised, for our culture designates women's knowledge as "trivial" if it is not acquired in the male-dominated world outside the home.

Another author who deals with this theme is Susan Griffin whose book, *Pornography & Silence,* has just come out. When I read it, Tillie Olsen's heroine, Eva, came to mind as an archetypal example of what Griffin means when she discusses the artificially imposed split betwesen nature and culture which our society demands.

> A woman who is a mother is divided from culture. And because of this she must be split in her own soul. Despite the propaganda of a culture which excludes women, women have a capacity for culture which is as large as the human capacity. But culture has ordained that women has no need of culture and culture has no need of her, and so she is excluded from the life of her society. One of the means of this exclusivity is to make her a mother.[2]

Eva — mother of all — is the protagonist in "Tell Me a Riddle." The original creatrix and law-giver for humankind has become a drudge whose words are unheeded, whose wisdom is despised. Yet, though Olsen shows us that the wastage and loss are real, that something precious has been lost to the world, she somehow manages to convey a sense, not of futility, but of transcendence. What prevents her portrayal of Eva from being merely a sad and pathetic story, what gives us a sense of being profoundly moved to pity and terror and ". . . of being one and indivisible with the great of the past,"[3] is Olsen's ability to convince us that her heroine is a woman of some stature. She doesn't give herself much space in which to accomplish this task.

The woman in this story is a Russian Jew. Before or during the 1905 revolution she suffers exile and imprisonment — solitary confinement, actually — in Russia — for her political activities. She is freed, emigrates with her young husband to the United States — presumably in search of a better life in "the land of peace and freedom." But Eva in the United States fares little better than Eva in Russia. She becomes a kind of serf to her husband and family. While the level of the family's poverty is not so severe as it would have been in Russia, her spiritual life is smothered in the daily struggle against the humiliations poverty imposes in the U.S. and her voice is silenced just as effectively as the voices of her mothers before her.



But when we are introduced to her, at the beginning of the story, we know nothing of Eva's past. Olsen deliberately shrouds the grandeur of this woman's spirit in the rags of her servitude. In fact, when we first meet Eva, she has become a stranger to herself. In the eyes of her daughter-in-law, Nancy, she is merely an embittered drudge, whose one way of making herself useful — cleaning house — is seen as an implied reproach. "'I can't enjoy Sunday dinner, knowing that half-blind or not she's going to find every speck of dirt . . .'" (p. 80). Nancy prefers the company of her father-in-law.

> "'When I think of your dad, who could really play the invalid with that arthritis of his, as active as a teen-ager, and twice as much fun . . .'" (p. 81).

The reader can see the effects of the blight in Eva's sharp tongue, in her bitterness, and in her desire for solitude, or rather, hermitude.

Neither Nancy nor the reader can see into the past for the reasons behind her mother-in-law's bitterness and her father-in-law's cheerfulness. She can only see the grandmother's bitterness, feel her grudging struggle with life. She does not connect her father-in-law's light-hearted attitude with her mother-in-law's dour practicality. She can't understand that when Eva was young, her few chances for happiness and pleasure were sacrificed for the convenience and preference of the young man who was her husband. When he tries to persuade her that they should sell their home and move to a retirement village, she replies,

> 'Now, when it pleases you, you find a reading circle for me. And forty years ago when the children were morsels and there was a circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go? Even once? You trained me well. I do not need others to enjoy.' (p. 75)

Her husband's main reason for wanting to sell their home is the fact that he dislikes having to do any repair work around the house. His conviction that his comfort and his desires legitimately outweigh any needs or desires his wife might have is congruent with his behavior as a young man. Since his wife had to shoulder the ultimate responsibility for the children, naturally he's cheerful. Why shouldn't he be cheerful? If things got too rough, it was up to her to bicker with the landlord and the corner grocer for credit, and up to her to see that the children had clothes decent enough for school.

> . . . from those years she had had to manage, old humiliations and terrors rose up, lived again, and forced her to relive them. The children's needings; that grocer's face or this merchant's wife she had had to beg credit from when credit was a disgrace; the scenery of the long blocks walked around when she could not pay; school coming, and the desperate going over the old to see what could yet be remade; the soups of the meat bones begged "for-the-dog" one winter . . . . (p. 76).

He could have made life easier for her, had he chosen to do so. But it was not easy or convenient for him, and in bearing the full weight of responsibility, she has become bent out of shape. She has tried to numb her longings by work, first work that was needed by others, and later by herself.

Any dreams she had had were drowned in the need to provide for her children. The children of her soul, her visions, her passion, her ideas, her hopes for a better world were simply made flesh incarnate, and instead scattering her words on the wind, food for dreams, food which can sustain the hearer beyond the single day, she provided her family with "dog-bone" stew.

If the cruelty and wretchedness of her betrayal could have been embodied in any physical form, then perhaps she would, like her friend, have leapt for its jugular. But there was no single human being upon whom to lay that blame. The culture that had socialized her husband and herself to look upon her children and household as her primary responsibilities, and made her husband only secondarily responsible for the physical well-being of their children, made it effectively impossible for her to break the shackles of her life.



When she becomes seriously ill (apparently from her husband's relentless nagging) her husband's cruel selfishness is apparent in his reaction to her pleas for his companionship. That he could have the company of others if he chooses it, without imposing it on her who had become a stranger to the world, is apparent in the fact that he goes out for a night of socialization when she is ill and frightened and lonely. And finally, she curses him.

Eva's smoldering intelligence has been banked, but never fully extinguished . . . just as with the slowly dying young mother of *Yonnondio,* whose senses and imagination revive under the influence of spring in a blossoming meadow, Eva's thirst for meaning still persists. She has some sense, in her illness, that it is important for her to remember what brought her to where she is now, how she came to be this person. We have a sense that she is a stranger to herself as well as to those around her. She seems to be only dimly aware of how she lost herself entirely in the struggle to give her six children the love and nourishment they needed.

It seems that she has literally forgotten who she had been before her children came. She had forgotten the *feelings,* the passionate belief that she could matter, that her life would make the larger world a better place to live. Her emotional struggles to come to terms with her feelings, to go back in herself to a source of passion that was not the new body of a human being, are portrayed in terms we can believe; these feelings have their source in a woman's body and can be described in terms of bodily sensation. They are real feelings. These are not abstractions. What *is* it to experience "motherly love?" Why does the aged woman shudder and sweat when she is offered a baby to hold?

Eva's life has been co-opted by others for so many years that they take her sacrifice of self as their due. This refrain runs over and over through her thoughts (as her husband continually exhorts and admonishes her to give up her home), ". . . never to be forced to move to the rhythms of others." Her need for space and time for herself has always been and still is completely disregarded by her husband and family, and she finds it nearly impossible to press her own claims against theirs. As Olsen quotes

Rilke in *Silences,* "Anything that makes demands, arouses in me an infinite capacity to give it its due, the consequences of which completely use me up." While Rilke could get away from his family long enough to create, there is a strong taboo on a mother closing the door on her family for even an hour. That Eva's own conscience prevented her from doing this is apparent in her reaction to her grandson. When they bring him to her to hold she shudders and sweats. Her body can no longer tolerate the voracious demands of others, and since for her to acknowledge the need of the other is to feel compelled to fill it, she must turn away. She cannot bring herself to hold him.

What Eva needs are solitude and stillness; she must have these in order to recall from oblivion a self different from, more powerful than the bewildered one which is drawing to the end of its journey, and must absolutely make some sense of its terrible past: "Still the springs were in her seeking. Somewhere an older power that beat for life. Somewhere coherence, transport, meaning" (p. 93).

But she is not allowed either solitude or stillness until she is quite literally on her death-bed. Even after major surgery, and while she is supposed to be convalescing, the only way she can find some peace and quiet and avoid her boisterous grandchildren is to hide in the bedroom closet. And even there they track her down.

The most remarkable aspect of her dying is her desire to make contact with humankind in a wide, far-reaching sense. She has been shut up and excluded from participation in the culture by the fact of her motherhood; this has been a kind of death for her. Her attempt to remember what she had been, what she used to share with humanity, is her attempt to extend the boundaries of her ego, an attempt to transcend the confines of her life. Her one year in the frozen wastes of Siberia, her solitary confinement, was to be the metaphor of her entire life. Her triumph is in her finally bursting through the dammed-up forces to the repressed desires and passions of her youth.

The first real indication we get that this is not an ordinary woman is the incident with the rabbi at the hospital. She has no desire to escape into what she considers superstition. She has



a deeply religious attitude, but her real religion is belief in the shared consciousness of humanity. She considers religious customs — as they have been handed down — merely one more way to divide humanity. "Tell them to write: race, human, religion, none" (p. 89). She is cultured, in the best sense of the word. She has courage. She does not, even in her most miserable hours, turn to supernatural forces to rationalize or explain the degradation and misery of her life.

Her outlook seems rather startling to the reader in light of her having so little interest in her neighbors, in light of her apparently empty life, and in light of her approaching death. She has taken shape as a fairly conventional woman up to this point. True, she had mentioned that "she never did like queens" but we don't guess how vehemently she disliked them until we hear that she had been imprisoned for her revolutionary activities.

In Eva's delirium, the youthful orator of the 1905 revolution comes to life again and speaks so eloquently that her husband would silence her if he could. Her hopeful, joyous words, issueing from the lips of a woman already nearly a corpse, resonate through his encrusted layers of compromise and despair and he is shaken to his bones by a sudden painful shock of realization that he too, had lost what had given his life meaning. He tries to justify the sacrifice by pointing at their grandchildren — but even they cannot make up to him his loss.

The narrator gives us a little of her style:

> Heritage. How have we come from our savage past, how no longer to be savages — this to teach. To look back and learn what humanizes — this to teach. To smash all ghettos that divide us — not to go back, not to go back — this to teach. Learned books in the house, will mankind live or die, and she gives to her boys — superstition. (p. 90)

From the fact that she tells us she had tried to stay awake to read after the children were in bed, we know that she liked reading, but do not realize how fiercely she wanted to learn to read until she is tossing with fever, near death.

> 'Have I told you of Lisa who taught me to read? Of the highborn she was, but noble in herself. I was sixteen; they

> beat me; my father beat me so I would not go to her. It was forbidden, she was a Tolstoyan. At night, past dogs that howled, terrible dogs, my son, in the snows of winter to the road, I to ride in her carriage like a lady, to books. To her, life was holy, knowledge was holy, and she taught me to read. They hung her. Everything that happens one must try to understand why. She killed one who betrayed many. Because of betrayal, betrayed all she lived and believed. In one minute she killed, before my eyes (there is so much blod in a human being, my son), in prison with me. All that happens, one must try to understand.' (pp. 112-13)

Yet Eva — as a young woman — is not clearly presented to us. It seems that she was ardently dedicated to learning, to political causes, that she took risks, and that she had courage and integrity. But beyond this she is hazy. She is an archetype of a youthful revolutionary. She was — or seemed to be — destined for an heroic fate. As a young woman, she suffered from her country's cruelty to youth and poverty; as a mother she suffers from her culture's cruelty to women. She became a spiritual hermit in order to forget how much she had dreamed of for humanity, to forget how much she had wanted to share her dreams with others.

To force a woman to live as Eva is to limit her influence to only that small circle of flesh she can call her family. She has to choose between the universal and the particular. The universal is uncertain; who knows what one's influence will be beyond the grave? And then there are needs, the need to love and be loved, to welcome and be welcomed after a battle, to be made safe. The knowledge that one has sheltered and fed and comforted another human being can be far more potent even than the need to express one's deepest beliefs. It is true that in order to produce much of artistic value, a mother has always had to divide her time between her children and her work. This is not in the nature of fate, however, but in the way in which society is structured: in accord with the values of the culture. What women need, what mothers need, is a sense of participation in all humanity. There is a wealth of learning and wisdom to be shared by all children of all mothers. Mothers are mothers of the spirit as well as mothers of the body, and for the individual child to



be the sole responsibility of a particular parent, especially of a woman in a world where women have no authority, is to make a selfish and ferocious community of human beings, who learn only to snarl and bite and seize each other for what they can devour. They learn that the world is cruel, that the world is uncaring and selfish, that their own individual survival in what matters, that they have not a common substratum of being with all humanity, that their experiences will never transcend their narrow margins of birth and death, and that they must, for that reason, fear and hate and deny death above all other thing. They learn to believe that material goods are to be cherished as the only means of protection against death, that it is acceptable to watch other human beings die of poverty and neglect and despair, that it is all right to watch a mother lose all of her joy in life as a drudge for others, and that if she bears children of her own body then she has no right to bear children of the spirit.

Eva's knowledge — her long-stored dreams of humanity's fulfillment — are not valued by her culture because she is a woman. When she speaks, breaking a life-long silence, her husband's immediate response is. "Where are the pills for quieting? Where are they?" (p. 90). But also her knowledge of the body is denigrated, by herself as well as by others. She sees in her grandchildren only "lovely mouths" that devour.

Griffin would say that mothers' experience isn't valued because this culture does not value knowledge of the body; this culture attempts in every way to deny the finitude and mortality of the body, to reject limitations and death. Yet Eva's knowledge, of the body's vulnerability, its susceptability to scarring, is vital knowledge; it is what she learned with her living, and it is what her children need to know.

Eva is twice betrayed. First, because she is a woman her culture confines her to motherhood and despises her thirst to participate in the larger world. Then again, after she has bitterly learned the lessons of motherhood and poverty and death and birth, the tenderness and vulnerability of human love and human flesh, her knowledge is despised, because it is finite knowledge, knowledge that acknowledges finitude and limitations, that has no pretensions to omnipotence or eternal grandeur — vulnerable

knowledge, for it will vanish with its bearer. Too late her family realizes what they have lost. Eva's eldest daughter — Clara — asks,

> '. . . where did we lose each other, first mother, singing mother? . . . I do not know you, mother. Mother, I never knew you.' (116)

And her son, "Lennie, suffering not alone for her who was dying, but for that in her which never lived (for that in him which might never live)" (p. 117), is aware that his mother's spiritual impoverishment has also been his own.

When Eva's children finally come together to stand by their mother's death-bed, and the riddle hangs in the silent air: "And what did you learn with your living, mother, and what do we need to know?" We hear nothing, for their mother is past coherent speech.

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NOTES

1. William Blake, quoted in Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1979), p. 38.
2. Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 142.
3. Tillie Olsen, "Tell Me A Riddle" (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), p. 122. All further references are indicated in the text.

# SURROGATE MOTHERS: THE MANIPULATION OF DAUGHTERS IN WORKS BY JESSAMYN WEST

JANE S. BAKERMAN

Jessamyn West, a native of Indiana, is one of the most popular and most productive Midwestern writers to emerge during the last forty years. Best known for her cheerful, lively, episodic novels depicting the lives of Quaker Hoosiers during the Civil War period, *The Friendly Persuasion* and *Except for Me and Thee,* West is sometimes overlooked as a writer who treats serious themes. Critics tend to concentrate on the delightful humor of the Quaker stories and to ignore the author's true power and scope. No one, for instance, has created more effective portraits of adolescent girls; no one has made Hoosier frontier life come alive more vividly, and no one has examined the tenderness and the tensions of American family life more tellingly. The West canon is, in fact, sophisticated and varied. Though the novels and stories range widely in topic and setting, one theme appears again and again.

West holds that love must be freely given and accepting, that the lover must not demand changes or proofs of loyalty on the part of the loved one. This idea, vividly dramatized in the fiction, is stated overtly in *The Woman Said Yes* (1976), a nonfiction work which depicts the author's relationships with her mother and her sister. West believes that a good part of her ability to affirm life, to say yes to it, was taught her by Grace, her mother, and by Carmen, her sister. She takes that lesson seriously:

> If there is any lesson for me to learn from my life so far, it is that love must not abate. It must not hinge upon reciprocity. If you have truly loved, love on, no matter what.

> Admit that this act or word in the loved one is undesired—but love on. Otherwise you build up for yourself great suffering.[1]

Frequently, as one might expect, West explores her theme through portraits of married couples or lovers, a pattern evident in successful works such as *Leafy Rivers, The Massacre at Fall Creek,* and *The Life I Really Lived.* The power and importance of this theme are intensified, however, in novels which examine relationships between mothers and daughters. Always, the love between parent and child is potentially strong, and always the mothers intend to be supportive and nurturing, but they make crucial errors.

In all West's fiction, a character's ability to accept her own sexuality signifies her full maturity. *The Witch Diggers* (1951),[2] *South of the Angels* (1960),[3] and *A Matter of Time* (1966,)[4] however, portray mothers who fear their sexuality and who, therefore, are never fully matured human beings. These mothers impose their fears on their daughters and demand that the girls live up to standards of sexual behavior the mothers themselves might not be able to uphold. It is made clear to the daughters that they must earn their mothers' love by attaining those standards, by rejecting their own sexuality.

These immature mothers also barter their love in another way; they expect their teenaged elder daughters to behave as surrogate mothers: one daughter mothers her mother; the others mother their younger sisters. Denied full and natural development as adolescents, the girls become old before their time — they risk imitating their mothers' pattern: aging without maturing. They further risk a permanent denial not only of their own sexuality but also of their true personalities, for they are encouraged to appear to be what they are not.

Press Cope of *South of the Angels* has become an expert at such pretense by the time she has reached her teens. Her struggle with surrogate motherhood parallels the maturations of other adolescents in this long novel, which tells the story of an entire California county. The tension within the Cope family is a major center of interest, and the relationship between Indy Cope and her daughter, Press, serves as a unifying factor in the loosely constructed plot.



Indy Cope is unhappy in her marriage because she finds her husband sexually unsatisfying. West attributes this aridity to the fact that Cope rejected Indy when she offered herself to him shortly before their wedding date. The rejection denies Indy the capacity to grow to full maturity; shamed and humiliated, she remains childish; "she did not know who to be: she did not know how to be a woman the age of a wife" (p. 141). Cope ignores the problem even though Indy's distress is demonstrated in scene after scene. Press, however, is intensely aware of her mother's hidden anger. Though she does not understand its source, she is painfully conscious of the fact that Indy despises life within the Cope family.

Because she has been taught nothing useful about sexuality (only that it is dangerous and is to be suppressed), Press perceives Indy only as mother, rarely as wife, a point of view which leads her to conclude that *she* is the one who has failed her mother in some unknown way. Consequently, she labors under a sense that there is something she must make up to her mother. Terrified lest Indy die before the imagined debt can be paid, Press struggles to earn her mother's love by subordinating herself and her wishes to her mother and her mother's needs, and by training her younger sister to do the same.

For Press Cope, the way to make an unhappy mother happy is to mother her, to set aside her own desires and plans to serve her mother. In payment of the imagined debt Press believes she owes her mother, she very nearly sacrifices her own love for Chad Lewis; to deny Chad would be, she believes, the ultimate recompense, and only her discovery of Indy's infidelity frees her to focus her attention upon herself. In a rather melodramatically symbolic rejection of childish daughterhood and thrust toward womanhood, Press flees to her fiancé, who accepts the love she offers. West clearly approves of the gesture and of the acceptance:

> if he suggested postponement, Press might understand with her mind. But her body wouldn't understand. Her body might never forgive him, and he couldn't risk that. She,

his wife, but her body, for the rest of their lives, his enemy. (p. 459)

The parallel to the older Copes' situation is a bit obvious, but the Press-Chad relationship is set right, and their marriage will be fulfilling. The partners will not only cherish but will genuinely understand one another. The transformation into maturity has been symbolized and sealed by honest sexual development — and thus Press is freed from her mother. Indy feels the estrangement keenly:

> So she had lost no one except Press. . . . Oh, my daughter, I have driven you from your home. You couldn't stay where I was. . . . She had always known that, back of Press's feverish care for her, back of her incessant fussing over her, Press was making something up to her. Making up what? I wasn't the mother Press wanted or needed somehow. And the more she felt that, the harder she worked to hide it from me. Oh Press, come back, come back. Feel what you want to. Hide nothing. You don't have to love me or make it up to me for not loving me. (pp. 479-480)

In this novel, then, the threefold pattern is clear. Indy Cope is unable to come to terms with her own sexuality. Preoccupied with her own needs, she ignores her daughters' problems, and Press Cope senses that something is awry, assuming the burden of guilt to be her own. The daughter's unmanageable sense of responsibility makes Press doubt her love for her mother, so in addition to "mothering" her younger sister, Press tries to "mother" her mother. It is only by chance that Indy's vain efforts to save herself save her daughter, but even so, the cost is high; Press rejects Indy for failing to live up to the false sexual standards the mother, herself, has set. Permanent immaturity for Press has been averted, but Indy's dim understanding comes too late.

Indy Cope, like all the mothers in the West canon, does not intend to be a negative factor in her daughter's development. She becomes hurtful because of her preoccupation with her own situation whereas other mothers are damaging because of too much preoccupation with the sexual pitfalls they fear for the girls.

Like *South of the Angels, The Witch Diggers,* set in southeastern Indiana at the turn of the century, is a crowded novel,



full of subplots, but here, West focuses upon a single family, the Conboys. The mother-daughter motif provides the motivation in the main plot, the maturation of the hero, Cate Conboy. The maturation of Cate's little sister, Em, parallels that of Cate, forming the most important subplot. In both plots, the chief influence on the girls' growth and development is their mother, Lib.

Lib Conboy is an extremely sensual woman, and she hates and distrusts that facet of her character:

> far from resulting in any laxness of conduct, [it] made her unusually stiff-necked and wary in her encounters with males — as if she were a traveler temporarily lodged with a tribe whose habits, while fascinating, might not be entirely dependable. (p. 67)

Lib's distrust of her own impulses causes her to be cruelly harsh with Cate as her daughter matures. In an early episode, Lib comes upon Cate and Em bathing together as they always do. Suddenly, Lib lashes out:

> 'Cover yourself with a towel,' her mother ordered.
> 'I never have,' Cate had faltered. You never said —
> 'I say now." Her mother had lifted her hand again. 'You've changed. You're a woman. You shouldn't display yourself. You're not nice. You'll shock Emma, give her bad thoughts.' (pp. 49-50)

This brief scene establishes the tensions which haunt Cate's tragic adolescence; she learns that her mother doesn't trust her, that to be a woman is "not nice," that she is guilty of some grave fault, and that she must not pass along her flaw to Emma. These impressions are steadily reenforced by Lib's frequent warnings:

> '[there is] weak bad blood in the family. It's in us too, but we don't have to give in to it. And I didn't. And you don't have to either, Cate. But it's there and we've got to be on our guard.' (p. 189)

These lessons so mark Cate's value system that when she falls in love with Christie Frazier, she is horrified by her sexual response to him, visualizing herself as "climbing over . . . many barriers to reach" him (p. 167). For a difficult period, Cate believes herself to be singularly wicked because she desires Christie,

and when a series of terrible events and revelations forces her to confront the fact that sensuality can touch upon any relationship, even that of her parents, she runs away, rejecting "the nastiness in . . . [her] own father and mother" (p. 312). Cate's journey is not redemptive, however, and she does not then learn that the world's rules for her behavior may differ from her mother's.

Lib's lessons have been too effective. Cate determines to "be on her guard" far more efficiently than her mother has managed to be. She deliberately marries a neighbor who does not stir her, believing that his family is above sensuality and that in marrying him, she will be able to control her sexuality and live, safely, a mysteriously better life. The marriage has terrible consequences, for when Cate finally realizes her mistake and resolves to live her own life, not her mother's, she sends for Christie only to cause his death. The loss of Christie is, of course, terrible, but because Cate has not only subordinated her own plans and desires in a tormented effort to "buy" her mother's love and approval but has also surrendered to Lib's demands that she serve as surrogate mother to Emma, this elder daughter must also accept some responsibility for her younger sister's extreme unhappiness.

Initially, the relationship between the two girls is fairly good, and, importantly, Em is extremely candid with Cate. This candor is amusingly illustrated in an early scene. Em, striving to feel grown up, has embellished her armpits with curlicues of "hair," drawn with burnt matches, and she proudly displays the effect to Cate (p. 48). The exchange between the girls is easy and natural — but it is followed almost immediately by the bathing episode in which Cate learns that she is responsible for Em's sexual innocence, for her purity.

Later, when Em comes to Cate with questions about sex, Cate behaves exactly as the girls' mother would behave; she avoids the issue and puts Em off with foolish answers, cautioning her sister that *nice* girls " 'think about helping other people. And good books. And how to be good housekeepers. And the beauties of nature. And religion' " (p. 188). Not again will Cate risk punishment and the loss of her mother's approving love by being open with her sister.



Left to her own imaginings, Em forms her own opinions about sex and eventually makes an attempt to cure a peeping Tom housed in the county farm the family operates. She appears before him naked on the theory that he will not sneak to watch what can be freely seen. " 'I took pity on him. How could nakedness hurt me?' " (p. 244). Their mother's reaction is harsh and violent, and Em, already a failure at curing the peeper, is humiliated before the whole family. Em's disgrace is exacerbated by the fact that it is Cate, fulfilling that constant responsibility to oversee the behavior of her younger sister, who has betrayed Em to Lib, and Em, rejecting both real and surrogate mothers, resolves that she is " 'never going to tell anybody anything any more' " (p. 247). This vow is instrumental in the death of Cate's suitor, and there is no indication that Em will regain the openness which so pleases the reader in the early passages.

Instead, Em, like their mother, seems doomed to a kind of bleak accommodation; there will be no joyful womanhood for her. In her early teens, she has been burdened by mother and sister with sexual guilt now reenforced by her guilt over Christie's death. Though for Cate there may be a very slender hope for eventual maturity, for acceptance of sexuality as a natural fact of womanhood, there is no hope for Emma. Cate — and through her Emma — has paid a high price for the love of a mother who is herself too immature to serve as model or guide. Further, the bargaining has been futile; its results are dark and full of pain, for Cate's efforts to achieve approving unity with her mother have resulted only in extreme isolation for all three women.

In *A Matter of Time*,[5] West moves the surrogate mother motif directly to the center of the novel. Depicted in extensive flashbacks, the youthful relationship between Tassie and Blix Murphy is the main plot of the book, and the current action, which frames the mother-daughter-sister pattern, stunningly powerful though it is, serves as a subplot. This novel is the only one of the three under consideration here to follow the sisters into adulthood, and it is only late in their lives that Tassie and Blix are able to repair a relationship which has been crippled by their mother. The reconciliation takes place well after the mother's death and under grim, stressful circumstances. Only when the sisters are pressed

to the extremes of their feelings for one another can they finally communicate honestly.

From the day of Blix's birth, the older sister, Tassie, is forced to serve as guardian of her little sister. Eventually, a part of that surrogate motherhood consists of being expected to spy upon the younger girl. The mother "would never believe that Blix wasn't boy crazy" (p. 18), and her suspicions torment both young women throughout their adolescences. Tassie, however, is a slave to them:

> Sometimes I hated Mother for her suspiciousness, for the black thoughts, whose true nature, except for their blackness, I didn't know. But I wanted people to love me. And especially you want your mother to love you; and the way to be loved, I thought, was to please people. I wasn't free, the way Blix was, able to say 'Goodbye for now,' and let people go to hell if they didn't like it. I was afraid they'd never come back. Something had orphaned me. (p. 23)

Tassie has been "orphaned" by the clear sense that she doesn't necessarily have her mother's love but rather that she must purchase it by behaving as her mother demands, by discharging, in fact, all the most difficult and the most dishonorable duties included in Mrs. Murphy's concept of motherhood.

In a flashback to the girls' young womanhood, the mother makes her most terrible demands on both Tassie and Blix. Secretly searching Blix's closet, Mrs. Murphy finds a kit for terminating pregnancy, and she demands that Tassie "talk" to her sister and get her to end her love affair. In Mrs. Murphy's view, she cannot, herself, deal with Blix, for "'She must still *think* [italics added] that her father and mother believe in her'" (p. 126). With unrelenting pragmatism, Mrs. Murphy demonstrates that she is willing to exploit Tassie's need to purchase her mother's love at the expense of the girls' relationship, for Tassie is facing a serious operation. Mrs. Murphy says,

> 'This happening at this time, just as you go to the hospital. It can be your last word to Blix — before you go under the knife, I mean. It will have extra meaning to her coming then. I'm not going to say God gave you this misery so that what you say to Blix will have added weight. But it has worked out that way. It's come at a time when she'll listen twice as hard. Want to please you twice as much.' (pp. 126-127)



As always, Tassie agrees, "'Oh, I said 'yes' to her. It was foregone'" (p. 128). Blix does, of course, break off the relationship, but it is not until years later that Tassie realizes what that gesture has cost her sister, and she is then forced to accept her responsibility for their emotional distance from one another. Tassie's efforts to barter for her mother's love have been nearly endless; the demands for proofs of affection haven't ceased until Mrs. Murphy's death, and Tassie has lost her sister's supportive friendship without ever gaining confidence that she has acquired their mother's accepting love.

The discussions that eventually bring the sisters very close to one another do not take place until the time of the novel, when Blix, dying of cancer, calls upon Tassie to help her end her life upon her own terms. Through the long period of nursing her younger sister, Tassie comes to grips, finally, with herself, putting aside her role as guardian and living only as a mature woman. Offering at last supportive, equal sisterhood, she is no longer the substitute mother. It is during the nursing hours, when Tassie is doing Blix's will — but doing so freely, consentingly, willingly — that the old, old pattern is broken.

> This was the first time I had ever stepped out of my role as elder sister to Blix. Admitted I was no example. . . . A kind of sick emptiness filled me as I did so. I was saying good-bye to a part I had played for so long that without it I didn't know who I was. No. I knew who I was. But I didn't know how, publicly, to be the person I was. Face to face, I knew my own self. But I had never let Blix face me. (p. 124)

Unlike their mother, Blix has offered Tassie equal partnership; she has asked for help openly, has offered no bribe. Faced with death, the final challenge, she has set aside her lifelong awareness that between them her mother and Tassie have cost her full sexual satisfaction, forced her into a life of compromise. Unlike Cate Conboy, Tassie eventually benefits from the opportunity to offer love freely to one who is capable of accepting it as a gift between equals.

*A Matter of Time* is the most positive as well as the most powerful of the three novels which treat the surrogate mother pattern. Yet, even here, healing, redemptive behavior comes late, and it is generated by the mothered rather than by the substitute mother herself. In this, her best novel to date, West again demonstrates that the surrogate mothers risk becoming frozen, like their own mothers, into permanent immaturity.

These three works of fiction make a strong statement to all mothers and daughters. Grounded in love as the relationship usually is, it is not, in West's fiction, sunny. Instead, the stories are darkly shadowed by portraits of women who have never accepted their own sexuality, never matured. Uncertain of themselves, they become distrustful of their daughters, demanding changes in attitude or behavior as proofs of love. Maternal love as a means of barter is a destructive force; Jessamyn West makes that point clear. The surrogate mothers in *South of the Angels, The Witch Diggers,* and *A Matter of Time* caution readers never to forget it.

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NOTES

1. Jessamyn West, *The Woman Said Yes* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 110.
2. Jessamyn West, *The Witch Diggers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951). All further references are indicated in the text.
3. Jessamyn West, *South of the Angels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1960). All further references are indicated in the text.
4. Jessamyn West, *A Matter of Time* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966). All further references are indicated in the text.
5. *A Matter of Time* fictionalizes experiences very like some real events in Jessamyn West's life. The section of *The Woman Said Yes* which deals with West's sister Carmen explains that Jessamyn West, like Tassie Murphy, helped her sister, terminally ill with cancer, end her life when it became unbearable. In the autobiography, several details of the mother-daughter relationship and other elements of the sister relationship are similar to those in *A Matter of Time,* but in the nonfiction, the emphasis is wholly on the positive qualities in those relationships.

# INNOVATION IN CHICAGO: ALICE GERSTENBERG'S PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA

MARILYN J. ATLAS

When one thinks about innovative American dramatists, one frequently skips over the early experimental playwrights that were a part of the little theater movement in Chicago during the 1910's and moves directly to Eugene O'Neill whose reputaiton as one of the great American dramatists was not firmly secured until the 1920's. Without wishing to minimize O'Neill's contribution to art or the intensity and genius with which he created such plays as *The Emperor Jones,* 1921; *Desire Under the Elms,* 1923; *The Great God Brown,* 1926; and *Strange Interlude,* 1928, plays that successfully touch upon the complexity of human longings and experiences, it is important to note that O'Neill's experimentation with dramatic form and the rich exploration of psychoanalysis and parapsychology in his drama did not originate with him. While O'Neill is the most distinguished and perhaps the most talented among the playwrights of his generation who revolted against the artificialities of the stage, his methods and themes did not originate with him or with Provincetown Players, his first theater group, but can be traced back to the Midwest, particularly to Chicago where dramatists such as Cloyd Head and Alice Gerstenberg were experimenting with dramatic form and exploring modern psychological theories through their plays half a decade before he did so. And they were getting recognition for it in magazines with which he was most likely familiar. Harriet Monroe's journal, *Poetry* printed Head's *Grotesques* in October 1916. Earlier that year she had written a review commenting on both Head's *Grotesques* and Gerstenberg's *Overtones.* Monroe was excited by Head's form and Gerstenberg's

use of "primitive selves": "Twice in one month the poetic drama—alive, modern and magical—by Chicago playwrights, on little Chicago stages! Let us have more and let us not be afraid to salute the miracle when it comes!"[1] O'Neill was obviously a brilliant dramatist, but he was not the first to use expressionistic techniques, psychoanalysis, and parapsychology in his plays. The asides used in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, 1928, were first used by Gerstenberg in 1913 when she created *Overtones*. Gerstenberg also preceded O'Neill in her dramatization of the unconscious. The influence of psychoanalysis is clearly apparent in Gerstenberg's *Overtones*, 1913, *Alice in Wonderland*, 1915, *The Buffer*, 1916, and *Beyond*, 1917, and it is not until O'Neill's play, *Desire Under the Elms*, 1923, that he explored the implications of psychoanalytical theory through drama. O'Neill's interest in parapsychology also emerged in *Desire Under the Elms*, but again Gerstenberg was the first of the two to examine the sixth sense in such early one-act plays as *Attuned*, 1918, and *The Unseen*, 1918.[2]

In a letter Alice Gerstenberg wrote to W. David Sievers, author of *Freud on Broadway*,[3] she discusses one of the original ideas she used in her plays and concludes that much of her innovation was intuitive and came from a strong interest in her own psychological make-up. She was encouraged to be creative. Born in 1885, Alice Gerstenberg was the only daughter of socially and financially secure German-Americans. Her father, Erich, a well established member of the Chicago Board of Trade, a position he inherited from his father, encouraged her to pursue her artistic and intellectual interests. Her mother, Julia, active in Chicago theater and music circles, was fairly liberated for her day. While her own desire to be an actress and to seriously pursue her talent was thwarted by her wish to fulfill her duties as a wife, she strongly encouraged her daughter to take her individual talents seriously. Her education in the arts began as a child. She was provided with a three room playhouse, a puppet theater, and a doll house which was lit with tiny candles inside and had a sleigh and horse at the door and a coachman to give the dolls a spin. This theater left a strong enough impression so that Gerstenberg could recall it in detail in an autobiographical letter to Nancy Cox-McCormack Cushman in 1950. Gerstenberg



also recalls in this letter that there was a stock company at the Garrick theatre near her house which changed its bill every week and that her parents, when she was old enough, provided her with ample funds so that she could see all the plays. As a teenager she travelled extensively with her mother, visiting much of the United States, Canada, and Europe.[4]

Gerstenberg's parents considered themselves freethinkers and encouraged their daughter to develop her own ideas. Gerstenberg read books on psychic inspiration and the seventh plane, topics that were beginning to be in vogue, and these influenced her writing. After graduating from Kirkland, a private high school, she, on her mother's insistence, attended Bryn Mawr College, but, as she explains in her letter to Cushman, she found classes there too limiting and rigid, although she rather enjoyed her out of class activities, which included acting and playwrighting.

Gerstenberg was part of Bryn Mawr's class of 1907, a class where fifty-one percent of the women never married.[5] Only upper-middle class and upper class women went to college during this time, and rather than being encouraged to marry they were given support if they chose to use their talents to help construct what looked like an ever expanding world around them. Pre-World War I America seemed to offer innumerable opportunities to individuals who were either wealthy or brave. Gerstenberg was both.

After her college career was completed, Gerstenberg returned to Chicago, a city in the midst of its golden age of creativity. She wanted to be near her family and to be part of an environment wihch was young enough to be impressionable, where she felt she could "press her finger and leave a mark."[6] Gerstenberg knew that she wanted to remain involved with theater. Early after returning to Chicago, she met one of her classmates, another Bryn Mawr graduate, Elizabeth Goodrich, who introduced her to the director of the Chicago Little Theatre. Maurice Browne accepted her application as an actress in his newly opened theater, one that was to produce Cloyd Head's *Grotesques* and serve as a model for little theaters all over America. He never produced any of her plays, but his interest in original talent must have

encouraged her to create. Between her theater experince at Bryn Mawr, her contact with *Chicago Little Theatre* and other private Chicago theater groups, such as Anna Morgan's school for dramatic art, and her instinctive interest in psychology, she was ready to help the theater move in new directions.

Gerstenberg was living in the right time, in the right place, with the right talents and interests. Chicago was growing, theaters were just beginning to break away from romance and vaudeville and Chicago during this time had more theaters than any other American city; and Freud's theories were formally making their way to America.[7] Gerstenberg could write pychological plays and still remain in a framework familiar to her. Her environment was diverse enough, so that given her education, class, and dramatic talent, she easily fell into the role of innovator and artist.

*Overtones,* 1913, one of Gerstenberg's one-act plays, marks the first departure from realism for the purpose of dramatizing the unconscious, and for her it came naturally. In a letter to Sievers, she explains how she went about creating the play: "Whereas Glaspell's *Suppressed Desires* was purposefully dealing with Freud, I was, I think, *proving* Freud in the sense of recognizing areas deep within us."[8] The plot, she recalls in the same letter, came to her when she was in New York calling on a friend of her mother's who was obviously trying to impress her. When the woman's husband mentioned that he was going to visit a neighbor, the woman asked him twice whether he was going to take the car, then a luxury only afforded by the very wealthy. She felt that there were four women rather than two present in the room: the polite woman, the woman trying to impress her, the polite self, and the self angrily aware of the women who is trying to be impressive.

Gerstenberg also felt that her three-act dramatization of *Alice in Wonderland,* first produced in Chicago, and then later in New York, came naturally to her. Without pushing her limits, she was able to give theater audiences glimpses of Lewis's brilliant exploration of unconscious life. *Alice in Wonderland* had been a part of her childhood. A bohemian but well respected friend of her mother's, Jeanie Hugo, a woman who rode a bicycle in bloomers and studied phrenology, gave her a copy of the novel when she was quite young.[9] Gerstenberg was happy to use her skill to translate a novel she admired into a form which fascinated her.



Chicago, as Gerstenberg knew, was the perfect place for her to begin her dramatic career, but she should have left the city. She had the opportunity to do so. In New York, visiting one of her friends mother, Theresa Helburn, she was introduced to Edward Goodman, and he asked her to help him start the Washington Square Players. She should have stayed if she had been thinking only in terms of her career, but she was not.[10] She wanted to be with her family, in her city. What gave her focus and power, also served, typically, to limit it.

If Gerstenberg could have accomplished more had she been braver, or less of a "society girl," is debatable, but what she did accomplish ought not to be either dismissed or forgotten. Gerstenberg published her first collection of one-act plays, *A Little World,* in 1908. These plays are less significant than are some of those collected in a second group of one-act plays, *Ten One-Act Plays,* 1921, which contains three works, *Overtones,* 1913, *The Pot Boiler,* 1916, and *Attuned,* 1918, which are particularly good examples of how Gerstenberg explores human nature with an impressive ease using methods which not only demonstrate an interest in psychoanalysis and parapsychology but also firmly establish her as an original and talented dramatist.

When Gerstenberg created *Overtones,* she purposefully made the plot simple because she realized that the technique of dividing characters would have to be the focus if the play was to be effective. Four actors are used to present the two characters in the play. Harriet and Margaret are fashionable women and Hetty and Maggie are their primitive selves. In Freudian terms, Hetty is Harriet's id and Maggie is Margaret's The cultured and primitive self are aware of one another and there is hostility between them: Hetty is angry at Harriet for marrying a man whom she did not love rather than risking poverty by marrying John, a striving painter; Maggie is angry at Margaret for marrying John because she is hungry. When the play begins, Harriet is preparing tea for Margaret, considering the possibility of still winning John's love and Margaret is hoping to get a commission for John

to paint Harriet so that they will be a little closer to financial security: if Harriet's portrait is painted by John, it is likely that other society women will follow her example. While the two civilized women attempt to establish an aura of warmth, their inner selves honestly admit their hatred of one another.

The power of the play is the power of a seductive dance where confrontation is continually being suggested but is never actualized. Gerstenberg works well with patterns and parallels. She has her split characters wear complementary dresses. Harriet's gown is light green and Hetty's is a shade darker. Her veil, however, matches Harriet's gown and is made of chiffon to reinforce the sense that unity of the self, though unlikely, is not impossible. Margaret and Maggie wear lavender outfits of parallel design.

Sound is another means by which Gerstenberg controls the play's ambience. The stage directions suggest that the voices of the cultured and primitive women be clearly differentiated. While those of the cultured women are affected and hanging, those of the primitive selves are staccato. The sound of the voices suggests that the relationship between ego and ego is more similar than that of ego and id. Harriet and Margaret are opposites in color, but almost identical in sound: Gerstenberg is effectively weaving elements of connection with those of dissociation, creating an experimental play that successfully examines the complexity of human relationships and identity.

*The Pot Boiler* is a very different type of play from *Overtones*. It is a satire which uses the technique of a play within a play, role reversals, and invites audience participation. The plot centers around the rebellion of the characters and the audience.

In this play, Thomas Pinickles Sud, a successful playwright, allows a young novice, Harold Wouldby, to watch him work with his cast as they rehearse a yet unfinished play so that Sud can help complete the dialogue. Gerstenberg got the idea for this play by watching Mr. Jehlinger, the director of one of her own plays, "Captain Joe," during rehearsals at New York's Empire Theatre."[11] *The Pot Boiler* successfully mocks self-important producers who have lost all perspective on how to treat actors and truly foster creativity. Gerstenberg has Wouldby ask Sud about



technique and he responds: "*Mum* is the word:" his policy is secrecy and the blame for failure is never his own:

> What do you call yourselves actors for if you can't supply acting when the playwright uses dashes! — This is the biggest scene in the play . . . The very fact that I don't give you a lot of literary lines puts me in the class of the most forceful dramatists of the day? My plays are not wishy-washy lines? They are full of action — red-blood — of flesh and blood! Now you do *your* part — bing-bang stuff! — shake them in their chairs out there — their applause! Now go to it! Go to it![12]

The lines to which they are to "go to" are: "You!/I?/You!/I?." Sud continues to demand without reason and to be angrily dissatisfied.

The actors have their own vision of whose fault it is that the play is a botch. One of the characters, the villain, Mr. Inkwell, is supposed to seduce the innocent heroine and the lines seem to be those of a butler rather than a gentleman making love. Mr. Inkwell questions Sud about them and Sud responds with outrage: "Haven't you any brains of your own? If a musician can transpose music by sight, can't you do the same to dialogue?"

Problems between actors and director continue. When the actors forget to cut lines they elicit ironic responses from Sud: "The trouble with you actors is you can't forget. Oh! if you could only forget!" Disgust replaces confusion when the actors all have guns pointed at each other, but Sud cannot decide who is actually to shoot whom. Even Wouldby, the almost dementedly respectful novice has reached the limit of his patience. He screams "shoot the author." The play becomes vaudeville and it pushes toward the "Happenings" of the 1960's as the innocent heroine repeats the novice's original question of "who shoots?" This time all the players exclaim in disgust, "Oh, shoot the author." By this point the audience also feels compelled to join the fun in modern terms, to participate by shouting with the actors: "Oh, shoot the author."

*Attuned* has yet a different tone. This play raises parapsychological questions and answers them with seriousness, mystery, and style. The play contains only one central character, Grace,

who is seated in her own dark room writing a letter to her husband, Tom, a soldier who is overseas during World War I. The play is short, controlled, and dream-like. Grace is reading her letter aloud. After a while she stops, looks at Tom's picture, asking him questions, asking herself questions. Near the middle of her monologue she has a premonition that he is dead. At first she revolts at the idea, and then wilts under the knowledge that she never will be with her husband again. When she reaches her lowest point, a mystical light appears. Slowly, she accepts that her husband is not gone forever, but that they cannot be reunited now; she also realizes that she must not grieve for him for he cannot explore the universe in peace while she is in turmoil. Grace finds the strength to let him go. The light vanishes and a man's voice off stage calls her name. It is her father from whom she receives a special delivery letter. It tells her what she and the audience already know:

> Tomorrow we go the the front again. I feel it is my last stay in the trenches. Perhaps by the time you receive this it will be over — but I am convinced that the soul survives the destruction of the body — and if it does I shall come straight to you —[13]

The curtain closes quietly and the reader joins Grace in her knowledge that she has just experienced what seems to be the exact moment of her husband's death.

*Overtones, The Pot Boiler,* and *Attuned* are diverse examples of the wide variety of one act plays Gerstenberg was creating during the second decade of the twentieth century. She has received some attention for her originality and form: In 1930 Alexander Dean, then a member of the Yale University Theater, taught *Ten One-Act Plays* and on April 23, 1938, The Chicago Foundation for Literature honored her with an award " 'for the excellency of work as a playwright and producer.' "[14] In 1955 W. David Sievers published his book *Freud on Broadway* and in it he gives her credit as one of the dramatists at the forefront of using pychoanalysis in plays. But as history will have it, recent dictionaries of theater history leave her name out of their pages. Her name does not appear in *Who Was Who in the Theatre: 1912-1976; American and British Theatrical Biography: A Directory;* or in *Notable Names in the American Theatre.*[15] It would be a loss to theater, Chicago, and women, to forget either her plays or the person who created them: if we lose Alice Gerstenberg, we lose not only one of the earliest creators of psychological drama but also one of the most representative figures of the Chicago Renaissance.



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## NOTES

1. For further information on Cloyd Head see my article "Experimentation in the Chicago Little Theatre: Cloyd Head's *Grotesques,*" *Midwestern Miscellany* VIII (1980), pp. 7-19; Harriet Monroe, "Editorial Comment: *Grotesques* and *Overtones,*" Poetry VII, 4 (1916), p. 196.
2. Alice Gerstenberg, *Ten One-Act Plays* (New York: Brentano's, 1921; *Alice in Wonderland* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1915).
3. Alice Gerstenberg to W. David Sievers, July 22, 1955, pp. 1-4. Alice Gerstenberg Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
4. Alice Gerstenberg to Nancy Cox-McCormack Cushman, June 13, 1950, pp. 1-32. A second part of this letter was written January 30, 1951, pp. 1-19. Other autobiographical letters: Alice Gerstenberg to Eames MacVeagh, May 28, 1953, pp. 1-7; A second part of this letter was written June 3, 1953, pp. 8-22. Alice Gerstenberg Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
5. For more information on Women's Roles in this period see Nancy F. Cott & Elizabeth H. Pleck, *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). Gerstenberg's autobiographical letters are excellent sources of information on the period. For additional information on Gerstenberg's perception of these earlier years, particularly on little theaters see *Townfolk,* January, February, and March 1948), pp. 19,26; 16;16; and *Drama Critique* (Winter 1966), pp. 44-5. Alice Gerstenberg Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois. The specific reference to fifty-one percent of the women in Bryn Mawr's class of 1907 never marrying is in her letter to Sievers, p. 1. For general references on Chicago during this period see Bernard Duffy, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1954, and Maurice Browne, *Too Late to Lament* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956).
6. Letter to Sievers, p. 1.
7. W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway: *A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama* (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), pp. 15-19.
8. Letter to Sievers, p. 2.
9. Letter to Cushman, I, p. 29.
10. Letter to Cushman, I, p. 19. Her letters to Eames MacVeagh stress how Midwestern authors in an attempt to foster one another's art sufficiently so that fewer writers would feel the need to move to New York created the Society of Midland Authors during the summer of 1914.

11. Letter to Cushman, I, p. 18.
12. *Ten One-Act Plays*, pp. 158-9.
13. *Ten One-Act Plays*, p. 142.
14. Letter to Cushman, II, p. 16.
15. Gerstenberg's name does appear in the *Biographical Cyclopedia of American Women, Who Was Who Among North American Writers,* and *The American Literary Yearbook,* among other biographical indices, but theater indices should certainly be including her name because her contribution to theater *is* significant.