

Beyond Regionalism: Harriette Arnow and the Creation  
of a Working-Class Aesthetic in *The Dollmaker*

Prepared By: Christopher Walker  
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Michele Fazio

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Approved By:

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Thesis Advisor Date

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Thesis Committee Member Date

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Thesis Committee Member Date

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## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	3-10
II.	The Concept of Empowerment.....	10-15
III.	The Empowerment of Gertie.....	15-19
IV.	The Silencing of Gertie.....	19-25
V.	The Re-Establishment of Gertie's Voice.....	25-33
VI.	The Power of Choice.....	33-38
VII.	The Circularity of Capitalism.....	38-42
VIII.	Conclusion.....	42-43

Christopher Walker  
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Dr. Fazio  
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### I. Introduction

Harriette Simpson Arnow (b. 1908) was an American author of both fiction and non-fiction who left behind only a modest collection of works upon her passing in 1986. Among these works is her most critically-acclaimed novel, *The Dollmaker*. The third book in what has become known as her “Kentucky Trilogy,” *The Dollmaker* chronicles the story of Gertie Nevels and her family as they transition from the Appalachian mountain area of Kentucky to urban Detroit during the war-rattled 1940’s. When Gertie’s husband, Clovis, is able to secure a job as a factory worker, due in large part to the void created in the labor-force as a result of WWII, she and her five children are forced to uproot from their idealistic home in Kentucky and follow him to the inner-city. The main action of the novel that follows is a harrowing tale of adaptation and survival as Gertie must adjust to her new home in Detroit, as well as to the new and starkly different social systems that govern it.

First published in 1954, *The Dollmaker* was immediately met with rave reviews from both scholars and non-academics. In fact, it was so well-received by audiences that it placed runner-up to William Faulkner’s *A Fable* for the National Book Award in 1955. But, despite this positive initial reception, *The Dollmaker* has failed to maintain any level of sustained critical discourse and, as such, one could argue that it has yet to be fully

explored and appreciated with regard to critical study. That is not to say, however, that Arnow's work has been entirely ignored by critics and scholars in the years since its publication. On the contrary, both Arnow and her work have been sporadically studied and critiqued through a plethora of theoretical lenses including feminist, humanist, and Marxist. But Arnow's work has nonetheless experienced significantly less critical attention than has the work of other prominent and canonical American authors like William Faulkner. Apart from a book comprised of a collection of essays written by various academics and compiled by Haeja K. Chung in 1995, no significant attempt at kindling critical discussions of and about the novel has been made in the sixty years since its initial publication. This noticeable lack of academic discourse seems oddly disparate when considering the praise with which the novel was initially met; which begs the question: why has *The Dollmaker*, a novel that was critically-acclaimed when it was first published in 1954, been thus far unable to generate and maintain any level of sustained critical interest in the years since its publication?

I would suggest that one likely and plausible answer to this question can be found in understanding the double-edged nature of Arnow's initial critical reception. That is to say that the majority of Arnow's early critics praised her use of rural imagery and the creation of her regional Appalachian aesthetic within the text. But the same positive initial critical reception that praised Arnow for her stunning portrayal of rural Kentucky life, while undoubtedly meant to be complimentary, inadvertently served the dual purpose of creating a focus on Arnow's "regionalism" that still persists today. Regionalism, in this context, is meant to imply the cultural and dialectical representations of rural Kentucky that Arnow uses to accentuate her aesthetic through both setting and

dialogue. This cause-and-effect relationship, however, has subsequently resulted in Arnow's being relegated to the realm of "regional" author within the modern literary canon. By creating such a strong focus on her regionalism, Arnow's early critics inadvertently superimposed the idea that she was a "good" writer *only* when she was writing within her regional comfort zone; i.e. the rural Appalachian cultural aesthetic. Interestingly enough, unlike the first two novels of the trilogy which are set entirely in Kentucky, *The Dollmaker* only spends the first few sections of the text in this rural setting before quickly and indefinitely transitioning to urban Detroit. Nonetheless, in making this implication, many of Arnow's critics actually serve her an injustice by unintentionally confining her to a very limited literary spectrum that does not fully represent the complexity of her work. As a result, Arnow's most well-known and influential novel has fallen to the wayside, and has become marginalized in a way that only serves to further limit its dissemination amongst modern critics and scholars.

Considering this, I would further argue that this form of labeling serves the additional purpose of limiting critical and academic understanding of both Arnow and her work; in that, relegating her to such a specific area of discourse thereby excludes her from other prominent areas of discourse. But in order to more fully understand and appreciate the significance of Arnow's work one must go beyond her regional aesthetic and approach her writing in new ways. As such, I assert that a much more thorough understanding of Arnow and *The Dollmaker* can be gained in viewing the novel through new contextual lenses inspired by a focus on her creation of a working-class aesthetic within the text. Expanding the theoretical approach to include an analysis of the ways in which *The Dollmaker* functions as a working-class text will open the door for new

avenues of exploration with regard to areas of focus like work and women's studies, individual subjectivity, power dynamics amongst groups and individuals, and capitalism in an attempt to better understand, appreciate, and explain Arnow's creation of a working-class aesthetic within the novel. By making this transition, one can approach *The Dollmaker* in ways that extend beyond the confines of regionalism and, thus, one can begin to more fully appreciate what the novel truly has to say about ideology, culture, power, and class.

Repositioning Arnow's novel as a working-class text illustrates how *The Dollmaker* contributes to the rapidly-developing field of working-class studies. However, before an analysis of the ways in which Arnow's novel functions as a working-class text can occur, one must first understand what is meant by "working-class" in terms of literary analysis. Working-class literature, as a collective whole, has traditionally been problematic; in that, the parameters established by the very definition of class within this context extend beyond the often much more physical social dividers, like race and gender. For example, Michael Zweig asserts that "class is central to our everyday lives. Yet class has not been as visible as race or gender, not nearly as much a part of our conversations and sense of ourselves as these and other 'identities'" (1). As a result, works that could be considered working-class texts are often categorized within the literary canon based on other qualifiers, as is evidenced by Arnow's relegation to regionalism.

But many modern critics are seeking to advance the study of class by more clearly defining the parameters that structure our understanding of it. Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson, in their work entitled "Toward a Theory of Working Class Literature,"

surmise that the working-class is “the blue-collar, wage-earning sector of our society, where people tend not to have college educations or financial assets beyond the market value of their labor;” and further assert that this economic sector of society possesses a culture that “differs in values and aesthetic from the nation’s dominant middle-class culture” (71). They continue on to define the literature of the working-class as “works written by working-class people about their class experience” (71). In these short excerpts, Christopher and Whitson establish clear and concrete parameters for defining both the working-class and working-class literature. But, while Christopher and Whitson’s assertions are substantial enough to stand on their own, it is perhaps more beneficial to view the theorists’ ideas in relation to those of other voices within the field.

Janet Zandy, a prolific voice and founding critic in the field of working-class studies, expands upon Christopher and Whitson’s definition of working-class literature in her book entitled *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*. In her work, Zandy states that:

Working-class writing may or may not have an overt political consciousness, but it does have a recognition of class disparities – understanding class not as an abstraction but as a set of lived human relationships shaped by economic forces and a shared materiality and relationship to work at particular historical moments. This historicity of class experience is inseparable from an understanding of working-class literature. Finally, one recognizes a working-class text by the way it invites, cajoles, even insists, that the reader step into the skin of a worker. (86-87)

In this excerpt, Zandy adds to the definition of working-class literature provided by Christopher and Whitson by further pointing out the connection between literature and lived human experience. Moreover, she goes on to offer a “modest” list of observations as to what constitutes a working-class text. According to Zandy, a working-class text: (1) centers on the lived, material experiences of working-class people; (2) serves as a representation of working-class life by writers of the same background; (3) contains racially and culturally diverse representations of working-class culture; (4) explores the functions of humor, language, and pride to illustrate class struggle; and (5) redefines aesthetics through a working-class context (90-92). Zandy goes on to surmise that “working-class texts take up the burden of an embodied representation” (90). In this way, working-class life is represented through working-class literature; and it is this concept of an “embodied representation” that will help shape our understanding of Arnow’s novel as working-class.

Traditionally, however, academic discussions of work and class have been deeply rooted in the expansive theories of Karl Marx, who establishes a clear binary opposition between the blue-collar, proletariat base and the white-collar superstructure. So much so, in fact, that Marxism has become the predominant school of thought with regard to the study of what it means to analyze class in modern academia. As a result, Marxism shaped earlier iterations of the newly-growing field of working-class studies, and references to Marx’s work pervade most serious attempts at discourse within the field. But the concept of working-class studies is one that has been rapidly developing since the 1980’s due, in large part, to the representation of narratives depicting the effects of the Industrial Revolution, labor migration patterns, and the societal shifts that took place as a result of

these real-world events. As a consequence, modern critics and scholars have begun to explore class in ways that extend beyond the binary limitations of traditional Marxist critique. For example, many modern critics, like Haeja K. Chung, Sherry Lee Linkon, and Michelle Tokarczyk, have begun to recognize the inherent limitations of Marx's binary opposition in terms of the study of class, and are actively working to progress the academic discourse in new and exciting ways. As a result, many modern scholars, like those mentioned here, are beginning to view class in ways that are outside of Marx's critiques of capitalism and that are posited in fields that many would consider non-traditional with regard to the study of class.

John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, two prominent voices in the field of working-class studies, expand upon this idea in the introduction to their book entitled *New Working-Class Studies*; which presents a "new" multi-disciplinary approach to the study of class in general, while maintaining a specific focus on the working-class. In their work, Russo and Linkon assert that:

New working-class studies builds on foundations laid in several core fields. These foundational fields provided important models that suggested useful approaches and essential concepts, but then they either moved away from a focus on working-class life and culture or never fully developed an approach that took the working-class seriously. Working-class studies owes much to these foundational areas, and we see important opportunities for building on these fields by refocusing on class.

(1-2)

The "refocusing" of foundational fields, like labor and women's studies, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, to the study of class provides scholars and critics with the

opportunity to use varying elements and theories from a multitude of academic disciplines to form new approaches to working-class studies. These new approaches, according to Russo and Linkon, seek to produce “a clear focus on the lived experience[s] and voices of working-class people; critical engagement with the complex intersections that link class with race, gender, ethnicity, and place; [and] attention to how class is shaped by place and how the local is connected to the global” (14). In this way, the study of work and class moves beyond its traditional Marxist foundation and becomes an interdisciplinary practice in which a multitude of theoretical lenses from varying fields of study can be applied.

## II. The Concept of Empowerment

When considering this approach with regard to Arnow's novel, a plethora of opportunities for critical and theoretical advancement in terms of class come to light. In the intricacy of her text and the richness of her character development Arnow is able to tell a story that explores a variety of ideas and stereotypes concerning class distinctions and the societal impacts that often result from them. But, as Wilton Eckly points out, “through all of Mrs. Arnow's fiction, character rather than plot shapes the stories” (124). Therefore, it stands to reason that much could be gained through the specific analysis of Gertie, the main character, and her development throughout the work, particularly her moments of empowerment and disempowerment and how they relate to her physical voice and connection to place within the text. That is to say that Gertie undergoes fluctuations of empowerment and disempowerment, and that those fluctuations are

contingent upon her ability to choose her own fate and to express herself vocally, or the lack of this ability.

But the concept of Gertie's empowerment can perhaps best be understood by first considering the discourse surrounding Arnow's "best-known novel" (Chung 1). *The Dollmaker* is an expansive work that has received critical attention from a variety of perspectives - feminist, Marxist, humanist, to name a few. Martha Turner surmises that:

*The Dollmaker* chronicles the lives of Kentucky's isolated hill residents and their eventual exodus from the mountains during the "Great Migration" to the industrial North during World War II. Arnow evokes the theme of dislocation with such force in *The Dollmaker* that most recent criticism of her fiction has centered on the novel's powerfully-rendered urban segment and on the issues raised by the physical and psychic displacement of Gertie Nevels, the self-reliant hill woman who finds herself painfully ill-prepared to cope with the dangers and complexities of urban existence. (1)

Haeja K. Chung furthers this notion by asserting that "regardless of [critical] approach, most critical readers focus on how the Nevels family from Kentucky disintegrates in industrialized Detroit during World War II, and particularly how Gertie, the central character of the novel, survives the assaults of harsh reality in an alien culture" (1). However, Kathleen Walsh negates this idea by suggesting that "readers who stress Gertie's helplessness adopt the character's own limited view of her situation and fail to appreciate Arnow's complex treatment of an absorbing and sympathetic character immobilized by self-doubt" (186). Walsh, therefore, implies that a focus on Gertie's

“helplessness” throughout the story has the potential to cloud the reader’s perception of her strengths and weaknesses as a dynamic and “absorbing” character.

What is interesting about these observations is the degree of polarity between them with regard to critical reception. While Chung surmises that most scholars gravitate toward a reading of Gertie that finds her both disempowered and disillusioned by the end of the novel, Walsh points out the inherent fallacy in doing so. With this polarity in mind, I assert that a study of work and class in this context would advance the critical discussion by looking at how Gertie’s work ethic ultimately creates a limited form of agency by which she is able to navigate the demands of an urban capitalistic society. Assuming this lens, therefore, opens the door for the application of such theories as Kenneth Burke’s pentad of motives and Michel Foucault’s concept of power dynamics.

A critical analysis of the periods in which Gertie’s empowerment is either strengthened or weakened can yield a more comprehensive understanding of what the text seems to suggest about the idea of empowerment, and how it relates to the construction of Gertie’s self-identity. According to Kenneth Stickers, “power is not to be thought of as something that subjects, assumed as already constituted entities, possess or lack” (51). That is to say that the individual should not be assumed to have or to not have power. Instead, the notion of empowerment, as it pertains to this analysis, is concentric upon the fulfillment of key roles in accordance with Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad. “For Burke, the world is encountered only in and through language,” according to Murray (28); and “the pentad is a way of systematically contemplating any act from a multitude of hermeneutical perspectives, ‘terministic screens’ in Burke’s vocabulary. For drama implies action and action implies, among other terms, an act itself, someone to do

the act (agent), a place and time for the act (scene), an end or intent for the act (purpose), and a means for doing the act (agency)" (Crusius 27). Put simply, this means that empowerment, for Burke, is the result of the agent or subject's ability to accomplish an act through the use of his or her own agency. Therefore, an empowered agent is one who can achieve a goal, whatever that goal may be, through the use of knowledge and/or skills that are either learned or are exclusively intrinsic to the agent. Adversely, an agent becomes disempowered when he or she is unable to achieve a goal or is otherwise removed of the agency required to accomplish an act.

When considering these observations, and how they relate to Gertie's power and construction of self-identity, it would appear as though Arnow's novel is advocating an ideology in which the construction of one's sense of self, or one's subjectivity, is materialistic in nature. For example, Robyn McCallum defines subjectivity as "that sense of a personal identity an individual has of her/his self as distinct from other selves, as occupying a position within society and in relation to other selves, and as being capable of deliberate thought and action" (3). That is to say that subjectivity, as a whole, is the sense of self that an individual develops and maintains in relation to other selves in the world. Proponents of the materialist perspective assert that this sense of self is a product of dialogical interactions with others and the influences placed upon the individual by the outside world. Elizabeth Ermath, a prominent social critic and theorist, asserts that "instead of a static singularity, this postmodern subjectivity is the moving nexus or intersection at which a unique and unrepeatable sequence is constantly being specified from the potentials available in the discursive condition" (412). This would mean that one's sense of self as formed in relation to other selves in the world is essentially a

moving focal point that is constantly influenced by the dialogical interactions that one has with others throughout the course of one's life.

Given this, it would seem that self-identification is not inherent within an individual but rather is developed and altered through human interaction, and in such a way that one's self is established based on an unrepeatable sequence that derives self from a spectrum of potential selves. Basically, humanity is constantly bombarded with choices and the potential for human interaction. The unrepeatable sequence of these choices and interactions constitutes the individual's idea of self, moves along the trajectory of one's life, and serves as a dialogical foundation for self-identification.

Perhaps the most well-known proponent of subjective self-identification is Michel Foucault. Subjectivity, for Foucault, is contingent upon concepts of power and the nature by which an individual "self" achieves power and authority over other "selves," as well as the processes for acquiring knowledge. "Knowledge, for Foucault, is not the result of free activity of the transcendental subject, but is rather the product of powerful social practices" (Paden 139). As such, it stands to reason that Foucault's perceptions of power and knowledge are built upon the foundational idea that social influences are directly responsible for an individual's formation of self amongst other selves. This supposition is in direct relation to the aforementioned definition of subjectivity presented by McCallum. The formation of self-identity presented by Foucault is contingent upon the outward influences impressed upon the individual by the society in which the individual is expected to interact, and as such are materialist in nature.

In the last century materialist subjectivity has become the predominant means by which many theorists believe that the construction of one's self is achieved. This process,

in contrast to intrinsic humanism, suggests that the dialogical interactions of the self with other selves in the world are responsible for the formation of the individual. Foucault furthers this notion and argues that this formation of self is in relation to the power dynamics present between individuals within a society. When considering these concepts in relation to Gertie and her sense of empowerment, it would appear as though understanding the dynamic and absorbing character envisioned by Walsh is best achieved by working to understand the power dynamics present between herself and those around her. As such, in critically analyzing Gertie's responses, both inward and outward, to her external stimuli, one can ascertain a greater sense of Gertie's empowerment. Also, in this way, Gertie's fluctuations of empowerment and disempowerment can be viewed as they relate to her position within any perceived power dynamic within the text.

### III. The Empowerment of Gertie

With an established framework we can now begin to analyze the ways in which Harriette Arnow uses Gertie's empowerment to create a substantial portion of her working-class aesthetic within the text. *The Dollmaker* begins at a moment of crisis for Gertie as she struggles to get her son, Amos, to the doctor located in the town nearest to her Kentucky mountain home. Amos is suffering from diphtheria, a bronchial infection that blocks the victim's airway, and Gertie is forced to ride her mule down the mountain to try and stop a vehicle in an attempt to expedite her trip to the doctor. In her desperation Gertie inadvertently causes a car carrying a military officer and his young driver to run off the road and become entrenched on the shoulder, and it is in the following scenes that we become introduced to Arnow's protagonist.

From the beginning, Gertie is described as being of a large and powerful stature. The second paragraph of the very first chapter begins with “[Gertie] rode on in silence, her big body hunched protectingly over the bundle” and continues on to speak of Gertie’s eyes as being “large, like the rest of her” (7). This early assertion of Gertie’s large size superimposes the idea of an empowered character early on within the mind of the reader. This assertion is further supported by both the physical actions of Gertie in the opening scenes of the novel, and the noticeable presence of her voice in relation to the other characters. For example, after the car becomes entrenched on the shoulder of the road, Gertie’s sole focus becomes to free the vehicle so as to solicit a ride into town. She begins to feverishly cut away the pine saplings that bind the car, she collects and stacks rocks under the tires for traction, and she physically forces the vehicle free by pushing it back onto the road, all while vocally pleading with the officer for a ride and correcting the young soldier as he haphazardly attempts to help. But the epitome of Gertie’s empowerment in these opening sequences comes in the form of her saving her own son’s life.

The knife moved again, and in the silence there came a little hissing. A red filmed bubble streaked with pus grew on the red dripping wound, rose higher, burst; the child struggled, gave a hoarse, inhuman whistling cry. The woman wiped the knife blade on her shoe top with one hand while with the other she lifted the child’s neck higher, and then swiftly, using only the one hand, closed the knife, dropped it into her pocket, and drew out a clean folded handkerchief. (18)

In her desperation to save Amos’ life, Gertie performs a roadside tracheotomy on him with a pocket knife and a poplar stem. Although this act is born of desperation, it is

indicative of the physical and mental prowess of Gertie's character at this point in the novel. The chapter concludes as Gertie enters the doctor's office with Amos after having finally solicited a ride from the soldiers.

The entirety of the first chapter, in fact, works to accentuate the concept of Gertie's empowerment. Gertie is presented here as a large and physical force that is empowered through her desperation, her voice is noticeably present as she commands the soldiers, and she is ultimately able to save her son's life through her own volition. In accordance with Burke's dramatic pentad, Gertie would be considered an empowered agent because she is able to save her son (act) by performing the emergency tracheotomy and convincing the soldiers to take her to town (agency). But these opening sequences also illustrate much more than that. Through her own quick thinking and a knowledge of her environment, Gertie is able to display a level of agency that far exceeds what would be considered the social norm. This fact is even acknowledged by the officer within the text: "You've done a thing many doctors would be afraid to do without an operating room or anything,' he said, all his need for haste somehow dropped away" (20). Janet Zandy would likely point out the fact that Gertie's agency is achieved at this point through the specific use of her hands as instruments for work. We see this in the physicality that Gertie displays: moving the rocks, pulling the weeds, whittling the poplar stem, and, of course, wielding the knife. However, the notion of Gertie's power in these opening scenes can be discussed even further in the exploration of power as a dynamic.

This claim is perhaps best understood through a Foucault-inspired lens centered upon the idea of power as a dynamic relationship between multiple parties. In considering the interaction presented between Gertie and the soldiers in the first chapter, it stands to

reason that much insight can be gained in understanding the dynamic, in terms of power, presented therein. Consider, for example, the fact that Gertie is established as a much more physically empowered character in comparison to the soldiers. While the soldiers are restricted by military formalities and chain-of-command, it is Gertie who removes the saplings, creates tire traction with the rocks, and ultimately frees the entrenched car, all while watching her son and "clawing at the muddy earth with her hands" (13). Moreover, Gertie proves herself to be more knowledgeable than the soldiers in this circumstance by possessing the knowledge by which to free the car from the mud:

The woman hurried up again with another apronful of rocks, dumped them, then went at her darting, stooping run along the bluff edge searching for more, The young soldier in the awkward, fumbling way of a man, neither liking nor knowing his business, got out the jack and set it in the sandy mud under the rear bumper. "That's no good," the woman said, coming up with more rocks; and with one hand still holding the apron she picked up the jack, put a flat rock where it had been, reset it, gave it a quick, critical glance. "That'll hold now," she said. She dumped her rocks by the wheel, but continued to squat, studying now the pines caught under the front of the car. (13)

In this circumstance, Gertie exerts power over the soldiers in two separate ways: (1) she proves herself to be a more physically formidable entity by freeing the car and performing the tracheotomy on Amos; and, (2) she proves herself to be more intellectually formidable by possessing the knowledge required to accomplish both of these acts. As was previously discussed, Foucault asserts that knowledge is directly related to power as both are social constructs. Therefore, in applying the Burkean method

in conjunction with a Foucault-inspired view of power dynamics, one can formulate an image of Gertie, in this context, that places her in a position of greater power in comparison to the soldiers who are, in fact, disempowered in Gertie's presence.

This idea is solidified in the final paragraphs of the chapter as Gertie expresses her apprehension about entering the doctor's office: "She glanced timidly toward the door. 'I ain't never been to a doctor before. Clovis, my husband, he's allus took th youngens th few times it was somethen Sue Annie couldn't cure.' [The soldier's] flat, absent-minded eyes opened wide in astonishment. 'Lady, you can't be afraid of nothing. Just walk in'" (28). The soldier's disbelief about Gertie being apprehensive or timid in this instance alludes to the idea that she has, in her physical, verbal, and mental exertions in relation to the officer and himself, established herself as a dominant, empowered agent within the presented power dynamic. As such, Arnow introduces us to a character who is empowered through her knowledge of and connection to her place, and whose power is evidenced by the work produced of her own hands.

#### IV. The Silencing of Gertie

Gertie's empowerment, however, does not end with the conclusion of the first chapter. In fact, Gertie continues to exert herself both physically and mentally throughout the course of the next several chapters of the work as she displays a certain level of comfort and control over her environment while still in Kentucky. As was previously mentioned, many modern critics point out the fact that working-class studies places emphasis on the importance of place in relation to the study of the working-class. In this case, Gertie's familiarity with her environment in Kentucky is evidenced shortly after the

events of the first chapter as she walks along the countryside with her daughter, Cassie. In these scenes, Gertie expresses a knowledge of the land's layout and of the harvests and even of the little tricks for the conservation of the land:

[Gertie] crossed a second rail fence, tumble-down like the first, but mended with pine brush piled in the corners and two strands of rusty barbed wire. Below it stood ancient black-trunked dying apple and pear trees, almost lost in the sumac and scrub pine that were smothering the growth of sage grass. One tree with a few knotty red apples still clinging leaned tipsily like a tree not quite blown down, but on going closer she saw the gully, deeper than she was tall, a red wound in the hillside stealing the earth from the tree. She threw in some fallen dead apple limbs and a few sand rocks, whispering as she walked away, 'That'll hold back a little dirt, an keep this hillside frum bleeden to death.' (52-53)

This excerpt illustrates Gertie's knowledge of her place, as she knows that by placing the fallen apple limbs into the gully she can slow the erosion of the soil and maybe save the tree. This knowledge of and about nature is directly related to Gertie's empowerment in much the same way as was her knowledge of how to free the entrenched car. By maintaining a knowledge of and a connection to her "place," Gertie is able to maintain a certain level of power and control over her environment.

But, Gertie's power fluctuates within the text; and, though Arnow establishes Gertie's empowerment through place, she also uses place as a means by which to silence and disempower her. Shortly after Amos' sickness and recovery, it is revealed to the reader that Gertie has been saving her money in an attempt to purchase a piece of land adjacent to her family's homestead known as the Tipton Place. As Clovis prepares to

meet with the Army recruiter, Gertie makes mental preparations concerning the purchase of the land, as she believes that he will soon be enlisted and will be required to leave. Her dream is to buy the land and establish a sustainable home for her family, and it is here that we see the beautiful and sweeping pastoral landscapes that Arnow has become associated with.

Past the beehives and the orchard, sheltered by the curve of the ridge side, and on a southern slope where the early sun struck fully, lay the flattish bench of ungullied land that held the house and yard and barns and garden spot. She smiled on the shake-covered roof of the old log house; the white oak shakes, weathered to a soft gray brownness, must have been rived in the wrong time of the moon, for they had curled in places, and in some of the little cup-like hollows moss had grown. Now in the yellow sun the moss shone more gold than green, and over all the roof there was from the quickly melting frost a faint steam rising, so that the dark curled shakes, the spots of moss, the great stone chimney, all seemed bathed in a golden halo and Cassie called that the house had golden windows. Some of the golden light seemed caught in Gertie's eyes as she walked down and around and at last stood by the yard gates. (53)

Arnow's depiction of the Tipton Place as a pastoral paradise bathed in a golden glow has earned her a great deal of praise; but we also see here another instance in which connection to place begets empowerment. Specifically, Gertie's connection to the Tipton Place drives her to work in order to save enough money to buy the property. Moreover, her knowledge of and connection to the rural landscape, in general, provides her with the agency she needs in order to accomplish this goal.

But, Arnow quickly presents Gertie's disempowerment as a period in which both Gertie's desires for the Tipton Place, and her physical voice, are both extinguished by the will of her husband and her mother. As the events of the novel unfold, it is revealed that Clovis has, in fact, been relocated to Detroit to work in the factories instead of being enlisted to fight. In his absence, however, Gertie has arranged to buy the Tipton Place and has even begun making preparations on the land when she is confronted by her mother, who has learned of Gertie's intent. The mother chastises Gertie for what she views as an attempt by Gertie to go against her husband; and she even accuses Gertie of turning her children against their own father:

"I give yer mammy money – yer dead uncle's money, her own born brother's money – fer to buy you decent clothes an all th things you need. Yer ever-loven papa goes away an is a stranger in a strange place – jist fer tu keep bread and meat in your mouths. There he is," she went on, looking now at Rueben as if he were the guilty one, "away off in that cold, dirty, flat, ugly factory town, a haven to pay money to a union – him that's never been made to belong to nothen. He ain't got nobody to cook him a decent bite a victuals. He could be took in th army, an you'd never see him agin. An what does yer mom do?" Reuben's shoulders stiffened. "She bought us a place a our own." Her mother turned away, weeping now into the saddle blanket, talking both to the gray mule and to God. "Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, she's turned her own children against their father. She's never taught them th Bible where it says, 'Leave all else an cleave to thy husband.' She's never read to them th words writ by Paul, 'Wives, be in subjection unto your husbands, as unto th Lord.'" (141)

In this excerpt, Gertie's son, Rueben, attempts to stand up for his mother and her desire to own the land and he looks to his mother for support; but, "Gertie stood and looked like Cassie when somebody caught her in a piece of meanness" (142). She cannot speak against her mother and therefore does not possess the power, ability, or agency to choose her own fate. This is primarily due to the ideological patriarchy of oppression that pervades Gertie's culture. As is alluded to in the excerpt, Gertie comes from a fundamentalist Christian upbringing, meaning that her family subscribes to the traditional Christian view that women should "be in subjection" to their husbands. Because of this, Gertie's choice to buy the Tipton Place in Clovis' absence was viewed by her mother as a sign of defiance in which Gertie was attempting to push back against the patriarchy. But, Gertie's position as subordinate to Clovis by way of marriage and gender is established by the ideological framework of her own culture. As a result, Gertie becomes a victim of patriarchal rule; she is silenced, her dreams are extinguished, and she is forced to leave her home for the confines of inner-city Detroit.

Arnold continues the theme of Gertie's disempowerment by creating a dichotomy between the idealized Tipton Place and the confines of the family's new Detroit home. As eloquently as Arnold presents the Tipton Place as a sort of "heaven on earth" where everything is golden and beautiful (53), she soon contrasts this pastoral utopia with the dark and dismal imagery of the Nevels' new home in Detroit. After a long train ride into the city, Gertie and her five children arrive in Detroit and take a cab to their new apartment home known as "Merry Hill." After arriving, Gertie takes stock of her new environment:

Gertie for the first time really looked at the rows of little shed-like buildings, their low roofs covered with snow, the walls of some strange gray-green stuff that seemed neither brick, wood, nor stone. She had glimpsed them briefly when they turned into the side road, but had never thought of them as homes. She had hardly thought of them at all, they were so little and so still against the quivering crimson light, under the roaring airplane, so low after the giant smokestacks. (169)

This is a stark contrast to the beautiful, golden glow of the Tipton Place as was previously mentioned. But, perhaps more important, is the effect that this new setting has on Gertie's sense of self and empowerment. Having made it to Merry Hill, Gertie stands in front of her new apartment before entering and notes that "the door was one in a row of six, one other door between it and the railroad tracks. Gertie turned sharply away, and across the alley her glance met another door exactly like her own" (170). Here, Gertie is immediately met with a crisis of identity as she notes that her door is just another door in a row of six doors that is across the alley from another row of identical doors. This loss of self-identity due to her physical displacement is devastating for Gertie, and it directly contributes to her continued sense of disempowerment through the remaining chapters of the novel.

Moreover, Gertie's size, a characteristic that previously empowered her in Kentucky, now serves as a means by which she is restricted. She finds it difficult to maneuver in the small apartment, particularly in the kitchen, and "she struck her shin bone against a chair as she closed the door. She bent to rub the pain, sharp in her half numb leg, and in bending her hips struck a corner of the low head of a cot-like bed" (171-172). This emphasis on the effects of place upon the individual, and the individual's

sense of power and self, are contingent upon the aforementioned ideas presented by both McCallum and Foucault, and serve to validate the new working-class assertion that place is of import when studying the working-class. Through place, Arnow is able to accentuate both Gertie's physical distress and her psychological distress at having been removed from her rural comfort zone.

#### V. The Re-Establishment of Gertie's Voice

Upon arriving in Detroit, Gertie very quickly realizes her discomfort. In contrast to earlier depictions of pastoral life, the imagery used by Arnow in these scenes presents a dark and dismal rendition of both Detroit and the small apartment into which they move. Furthermore, Gertie is described as being too big for the cramped space and the colorful imagery previously used to describe the Tipton Place is now noticeably absent. But Arnow soon begins using a recurring theme to re-establish Gertie's sense of empowerment by way of her physical voice within the text, that theme being a crisis of commodity shaped by a little boy's decision to purchase bubblegum over shoestrings, and the internal struggle that this observation causes within Gertie. Through the use of this specific theme throughout the text, Arnow is able to emphasize both the importance of money in working-class life and the personal development of Gertie as she adjusts to life in Detroit and begins to re-establish her own voice. The imagery recurs three times within the text, and at important junctures in Gertie's attempts at regaining power.

The crisis of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma is first established in chapter thirteen and presents a three-part moral quandary centered upon the importance of value, both monetary and non-monetary, and where that value is placed within a society. In this

scene the main character, Gertie, is escorting her youngest daughter to school for the first time since their move to Detroit. The daughter, Cassie, is restless and uneasy amongst the crowd of other children and stays close to her mother. Amid the bustle, a young boy becomes aware of Cassie's situation and attempts to console her by offering her two pieces of bubblegum. He proceeds to stay with Cassie for the rest of their walk, prompting Gertie to take notice of his attire. She notices, particularly, his worn out leather boots which plainly "would not hold out water" and whose laces were "not stout rawhide but broken strings" (198). Upon making this observation, Gertie begins to question why the boy was able to give her daughter two pieces of bubblegum but is somehow unable to purchase new shoestrings for himself when he so clearly needs them. After considering this for a moment Gertie postulates that "maybe there wasn't money for both" (198). Therein lies the dilemma: if an individual only has enough money to purchase the shoestrings that he or she needs or a bit of chewing gum that will bring happiness to him or herself, and possibly others, to which does one apply the funds?

It is with this epiphany that Gertie's veil of disillusionment begins to fade; in that, this minor observation spurs on more questions and leads Gertie to uncover a much more personal revelation concerning her own voice and empowerment. As Gertie considers the possibility that the young boy may only have had enough money to purchase the bubblegum *or* the shoestrings, she is confronted with an idea that is contradictory to what she has been led to believe is true of the city. "There couldn't be any poor people, not real poor, in Detroit when they were making men come out of the back hills to work in Detroit's factories" (198). Based on this line of thought, Gertie surmises that there ought to be plenty of money in the boy's home and, therefore, she cannot understand the

discrepancy. This discrepancy, however, is the much larger and more personal revelation for Gertie that poverty does, in fact, exist in Detroit despite her notion of the war's contribution to the city's workforce. Gertie is then forced to consider the possibility that her family has been uprooted from their home for a purpose that may not be as noble and/or profitable as she once believed. The impact of this moment of understanding, and the moral crisis that initiated it, reverberate throughout the remainder of the novel.

The bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma is revisited briefly in chapter fourteen and finds Amos, Gertie's son, begging her to purchase grapes from the fruit truck in the alley: "Buy um, Mom. Buy um.' Amos, loud and brash, almost as the Dalys, was yelling for some great greenish-blue grapes, the like of which she had never seen. So much foolishness. Youngens didn't need grapes in December, or did they? Shoestrings or bubble gum?" (212). This moment occurs just after an internal debate within Gertie as to whether or not the prices at the fruit truck were cheaper than the prices at the store down the street and just before the introduction of Mrs. Anderson, a character whom we later discover comes from somewhat substantial means. The placement of this scene, and therefore Gertie's recollection of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma, serves as a divide between Gertie's working-class worry about saving money and the introduction of a character who possesses greater monetary means in Mrs. Anderson. As such, the dilemma becomes a tangible boundary between perceptions of social class.

Moreover, we must further consider the implications of Gertie's internal struggle at this point in the text. One element of this scene finds Gertie struggling with the basic concept of money for goods as she deliberates back and forth about who has the best prices. This concept is difficult for Gertie, particularly in terms of food, because she was

accustomed to a life of sustenance farming in Kentucky. As such, her food supply, and therefore her means of survival in the world, had traditionally been provided by her own hands. But that power is taken away from her in Detroit as she is forced to rely on allowances from Clovis to survive, which clearly posits her in a position of lesser power in a Foucauldian dynamic.

Layered over this struggle is her internal debate as to the practicality of grapes in December in the first place. Her connection with nature and the seasons provides her with the knowledge that grapes are out of season, which causes her to question whether or not she should purchase them at all. Interestingly, it is this internal debate about practicality that reminds Gertie of the bubblegum boy. Also of interest is the fact that Gertie decides not to buy the grapes: "She felt more stingy still when a little redheaded Daly came, grapes spilling from his cupped-up hands, holding the grape-heaped hands in front of Amos, commanding: 'Yu want grapes? Here.' Amos helped himself as if they had been free from his grandmother's vines. Money enough to buy her youngens a mess of grapes would buy a vine" (213). As seen here, Gertie views everything in Detroit in comparison to the "other" that was her ideal existence in Kentucky. She opts not to buy the grapes for at least two reasons: (1) her connection to the pastoral landscapes of Kentucky make her aware of the fact that grapes are out of season; and (2) she surmises that the money spent on a mess of grapes would be a waste as the same amount could purchase a whole vine back home. Gertie's refusal to let go of her idealized "other" as evidenced here proves to be a hindrance in terms of her reclamation of power later on in the text. We also see here that Gertie is still unable to vocalize herself in any way that commands power. But, the

recurrence of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma alludes to the fact that the internal conflict that it initiated is still going on within Gertie's character.

The third and final mention of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma occurs on Christmas Day in chapter eighteen of the novel. Gertie and Mrs. Anderson are engaged in conversation outside as they watch Sophronie's daughter, Wheateye, playing with her new doll buggy. As they watch, Mrs. Anderson begins to reveal her opinion to Gertie by stating "isn't it awful how they work at terrible jobs – have you seen Sophronie's hands lately – and then waste their money? That housecoat: what in the world does a factory worker with three children need with a flimsy rayon housecoat? And all that foolishness for the children. It makes it hard on the others with sensible parents" (277). Gertie's response to this statement is to assert, without hesitation, that "man cannot live by bread alone" (277). What is of note here is the quickness with which Gertie responds vocally to Mrs. Anderson's statement in comparison to her previous dialogical interactions. Prior to this, Gertie has been noticeably more silent in Detroit than she was while in Kentucky, which is a key signifier to her current disempowered state.

Mrs. Anderson then continues on to say that "a flimsy doll buggy given by a mother who can't afford it to a child who won't take care of it has nothing to do with bread and God's word," to which "Gertie was silent, her thoughts on bubblegum and shoestrings" (278). In this final mention of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma, Gertie and the reader are reminded of the moral quandary in response to Mrs. Anderson's rather callous remarks concerning the financial decisions of one of their neighbors. Subsequently, the reader is also made aware of class separation by way of Mrs. Anderson's use of language. For example, according to Lew Rosenbaum, "terminology

such as 'working class' can only be understood in relation to another 'non-working class'" (2). This ideology essentializes the concept of the "other" as a means of understanding one thing in relation to another. Mrs. Anderson's use of phrases like "how *they* work" and "waste *their* money" is indicative of this ideology; in that, she considers herself as separate and/or different from the "them" that is Sophronie's family or the working-class sector. This reminder of class conflict comes, once again, coupled with the problem of bubblegum or shoestrings and the even more difficult task of determining each's worth in a commodified culture.

Moreover, this three-scene crisis of commodity serves an additional purpose. By looking closely at the way in which Gertie initially responds to her external stimuli during the bubblegum or shoestrings scenes, it is possible to track a transition in her point-of-view. That is to say that, as Gertie contemplates on the presented dilemma through the course of these three scenes, her viewpoint seems to shift from one that begins based in more utilitarian beliefs concentric upon a purpose-driven merit system to one that is arguably more consumer-based. Consider that Gertie's initial responses to what is happening during each of the three dilemma scenes are all separate and independent of one another. As such, they are able to encapsulate her viewpoint on the same topic at different points in her story in accordance with Burke's dramatic pentad, thereby providing the reader with deeper insight into Gertie's purported worldview as she transitions from life in Kentucky to life in Detroit. For example, Gertie's initial response to the first mention of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma is to quickly assert that "it [is] of course better to spend money for shoestrings than for gum, but..." (198). In her response, Gertie quickly reveals a utilitarian viewpoint in which the value of the "need"

outweighs the value of the "want." It is "of course" better to spend money for shoestrings in Gertie's mind because they serve a purpose, whereas the bubblegum is just a trivial desire. This purpose-driven system for determining value is likely a product of her rural Kentucky upbringing and reliance upon sustenance farming as a means of provision.

Gertie's response to the second scene of the dilemma sequence is much more neutral as she is simply reminded of the little boy and the dilemma he inspired through her own questioning of the propriety of grapes in December at the fruit truck. As Amos begs for her to buy the grapes for him, she briefly ponders whether or not "youngens" need grapes in the colder months. Her thoughts, however, quickly revert back to the boy and his shoestrings. The fact that Gertie remembers this pivotal event but neither she nor the text comment on it beyond simple narrative acknowledgment is indicative of the idea of contemplation; in that, the text seems to suggest that the idea is on her mind enough to be remembered, but she cannot yet decide her stance on the subject. As such, she does not express herself vocally and the reader is limited in the level of access granted to Gertie's worldview at this juncture, but is nonetheless reminded of the dilemma itself. Gertie's silence is important to note at this point, however, because it is indicative of a lack of physical voice and, as a result, presents the idea that she still lacks power and, therefore, cannot yet become an empowered agent.

Gertie's third and final response to the dilemma, however, is much different as she quickly asserts that "man cannot live by bread alone" (277). Her initial response to the statements made by Mrs. Anderson at this juncture is important, in large part, because it is a physical and external response presented through the use of her voice. In the previous scenes, Gertie's responses have been more contemplative and, therefore,

internal; a fact that alludes to the idea that she was either unwilling or unready to express herself to the outside world. But, her newfound ability to express her opinion seems to indicate a renewed sense of power and understanding as she chooses to voice it physically into the world. As was discussed earlier, empowerment in working-class literature is often linked to an agent's ability to express him or herself vocally. Given this, it would seem that Gertie's ability to speak her opinion is indicative of a shift towards empowerment as derived from her understanding of her place. As Gertie learns her surroundings and adjusts to life in Detroit, she slowly becomes more willing to speak, and more acclimated with the consumer-based systems that drive the city.

This change in Gertie's point-of-view is also a subtle one that is represented by Gertie's self-chastising thoughts about her own gifts for her children. As Mrs. Anderson chides on about Sophronie and her daughter's new doll buggy "Gertie [is] silent, her thoughts on bubble gum and shoestrings. She wished she'd got skates for Rueben – and maybe Enoch too" (278). The fact that Gertie wishes that she had gotten skates for Rueben and Enoch is indicative of the fact that Gertie has transitioned into a more consumer-based mindset. That is to say that Gertie's remorse at not spending money to provide happiness for her sons is far different from her previously asserted belief that shoestrings were "of course" a better purchase than bubblegum (198). This difference seems to suggest a fundamental shift from her previously held utilitarian beliefs as evidenced in the first scene toward a more consumer-based view by the third scene, separated by a period of contemplation in the second. It stands to reason, then, that Gertie's responses to her external stimuli and her point-of-view concerning the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma, and the moral quandary that it entails, are contingent

upon one another. Therefore Gertie's responses to the dilemma change as her opinions about the dilemma change. In essence, by critically assessing Gertie's initial responses to these three scenes, one can track a transition in her character development that begins with a more purpose-driven, utilitarian worldview and ends with a more consumer-based, capitalist worldview.

Arnow's methodical development of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma, coupled with the personal growth that it inspires within Gertie, combine to assist in the creation of an immersive working class aesthetic that is easy to understand and that is able to cross the divides of classism. But, according to Christopher and Whitson, "to deal with working-class literature as if it only had an aesthetic dimension is to fail to understand the fullness of this literature" (72-73). By framing her ideology in the guise of a relatable crisis of commodity represented by the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma, Arnow is able to convey the stresses experienced by low income families by encapsulating them in a real-world situation, while simultaneously representing the philosophical implications that such a situation would inherently entail: if one only has enough money to purchase either the item that he or she needs but which causes no joy *or* the item that he or she wants but which serves no purpose, but not both, to which does one apply the funds?

## VI. The Power of Choice

The use of the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma as a means by which to re-establish Gertie's physical voice is indicative of a methodical attempt by the author to illustrate a shift in Gertie's interpretation of the world. By abandoning her utilitarian

viewpoints in favor of a more capitalist system, Gertie is able to achieve a level of empowerment that directly relates to her understanding of her place as that understanding develops within the text. This idea is perhaps best evidenced by the cherry wood. Throughout the course of the novel, Gertie has consistently been working to carve a Christ figure out of a large block of fine cherry wood. The figure is nearly complete, but Gertie struggles with finding a face to go along with the body that she has meticulously whittled with her own hands. As Gertie's character undergoes fluctuations of empowerment and disempowerment, her interpretation of what the face of Christ should look like fluctuates, also. While in Kentucky, Gertie envisions a laughing Christ with a broad smile and inviting eyes. But this perception changes when she gets to Detroit, and her image of Christ becomes more stern and wrathful; and she even questions whether or not it was, in fact, the face of Judas in the wood. The pinnacle of Gertie's empowerment, then, comes at the end of the work with her choice to destroy her prized cherry wood in order to provide for her family. I would further argue that the physical destruction of the wood comes as a result of Gertie's own adoption of a more capitalist system as is indicated by the progression of her worldview in relation to the bubblegum or shoestrings dilemma.

In the final chapters of the novel, Gertie realizes that she can make money by whittling crucifixes and dolls and selling them about town. This realization comes when she receives a large order for generic dolls after having whittled a few for local patrons. As she and Clovis are struggling to provide for their children, the idea seems a welcome means by which to earn extra money, particularly when considering that Clovis is now on strike and therefore no longer generating a steady income. Although Gertie enjoys

whittling, and has done so for pleasure since the beginning of the novel, she abhors the concept of mass-producing her dolls. In essence, Gertie is resistant to the idea of commodifying a form of art that she brought with her from Kentucky. Given this, it becomes easy to view her destruction of the cherry wood as the final sacrifice made as she "adjusts" to life in the city, as was mentioned earlier. However, in viewing the destruction of the cherry wood through a new working-class lens, it becomes possible to assert a much different view of Gertie's actions.

The foundation of this assertion lies in the understanding that Gertie's actions at this, and all other points in the novel, have been products of her own derision. While it may seem that the misfortune that has befallen Gertie throughout the text has been beyond her control, our framework would suggest otherwise. Remember that both Burke and Foucault suggest that identity and power are social constructs, formulated by society in accordance to both tradition and perceived normality. This worldview, thereby, exemplifies the power of choice by its very nature, rather than stifling it, by suggesting that human existence is, at its core, comprised of a series of social interactions and choices by which we construct our sense of self based on external stimuli in our respective environment. Consider, for example, the previously discussed sections in which Gertie is silenced and disempowered by the authority imposed by her mother in accordance to the patriarchal norm. At first glance, this scene depicts a woman who is disempowered and, thus, becomes a victim of a social system designed to oppress her based on her gender. While this is a true enough observation, the materialist worldview would imply that Gertie could have chosen *not* to comply with her mother and Clovis' demands. She could have chosen to go against the patriarchy of oppression and stay at the

Tipton Place with her children. The fact that she did not make this choice seems to indicate that Gertie is not only a victim at this juncture, but also that she allows herself to be victimized.

Considering these observations in relation to the end of Arnow's novel, we see a much different Gertie. That is to say that Gertie's choice to sacrifice the "art" of the cherry wood in order to fulfill the large order for the mass-produced dolls is, indeed, indicative of her privileging capitalism over utilitarianism, indicating a shift in her worldview. But, perhaps more important is the fact that she, herself, is able to make this choice. Gertie is neither forced nor coerced into destroying the cherry wood. It was an act committed of her own volition as a means of providing for her family; and, moreover, it is Gertie, herself, who physically destroys the wood with an axe. In accordance with the Burkean pentad, this seems to suggest that Gertie has become an empowered agent at this point simply because she is able to use her own physical size, strength, and will (agency) to destroy the block of wood (act). But Gertie's decision to destroy that which she holds so dear should not be taken lightly, as it indicates a level of understanding and mental fortitude within her character that is rarely seen in a protagonist. Also, Gertie's choice here is reminiscent of her choice to perform emergency roadside surgery on Amos in the first chapter; in that both are actions that ultimately empower her, but both were born of desperation. If presented with an option that could have saved Amos' life and did not involve her cutting a hole in his throat, it seems reasonable that Gertie would have taken it. Unfortunately, no such option existed and, thus, Gertie was forced to make an unfavorable decision in her desperation; but a decision was made, nonetheless. Similarly,

Gertie is faced with an unfavorable decision in sacrificing the cherry wood, but her power comes in the form of her ability to choose to do so.

Furthermore, in considering the Foucault-inspired lens as was previously discussed, one could assert that Gertie establishes herself as being in a position of empowerment with regard to the dynamic between herself and Clovis by destroying the cherry wood. Remember that Clovis, at this point in the novel, is no longer the primary provider for the Nevels family as he is suspected of murder and is out of work due to strike. But, by destroying the cherry wood in order to mass produce her dolls for profit, Gertie effectively commodifies her art in such a way that it becomes marketable in a capitalist system. Therefore, her adoption of this system puts Gertie in a position of power because she now has the means by which to provide for her family, whereas Clovis has lost that means of provision. Given this, it stands to reason that a Foucault-inspired analysis of power dynamics at this juncture would privilege Gertie over Clovis based simply on their ability to achieve the desired goal, which is to make money as a means to provide for their family.

When considering the varying applications possible within the realm of new working-class studies, the validation of Gertie's choice to destroy something that she cares for so deeply in order to become a more adequate provider for her family inherently serves as a reminder of the perseverance and determination of the working-class. The power achieved by that choice is evidenced both in her physical destruction of the wood itself, and in her ability to verbally express herself at the conclusion of the work. In fact, the last lines of the novel are comprised of dialogue spoken by Gertie. This is important to note because it is indicative of the idea that Gertie is no longer silenced or

disempowered; and that, as was discussed earlier, her ability to express herself vocally is directly contingent upon her level of empowerment. Given this, it would seem that her ability to verbally validate her actions at the end of the novel is indicative of the new level of empowerment she has attained. Gertie's sacrifice at the end of *The Dollmaker* is just that; a sacrifice. But her choice to destroy the cherry wood, while heartbreaking, is not an admission of defeat; but rather it is a proclamation of defiance. When considering this assertion with regard to a new working-class study of the text, it becomes apparent that the previously surmised assumptions that painted Gertie as a disempowered character should be reconsidered in light of these new approaches.

#### VII. The Circularity of Capitalism

Arnow's novel also presents us with an interesting opportunity to explore the role of capitalism within the text. The implementation of these additional theoretical lenses will allow us to further our understanding of the relationship between Arnow's representation of working-class culture in the novel and the very real working-class culture that existed at the time. Kathleen Walsh, for example, asserts that "the industrial workers and their families [in the novel] are literally as well as figuratively mangled by the machines and systems they encounter. The overcrowded and underequipped schools teach little besides 'adjustment.' Consumerism is another engine of conformity; even the children become willing adherents of a system which requires that these bewildered newcomers spend more than they have on shoddy goods they do not need" (189). Here, Walsh envisions consumerism as an "engine of conformity" within the novel meant to adjust both the workers in the factories and the children in the schools to their new lives

in Detroit. Arnow, herself, seems to support this idea through the specific use of her imagery when comparing the school to the factories; and, also, in the crisis of conformity experienced by Gertie as a result of her struggle with self-identity and adjustment at the conclusion of the novel.

To exemplify this assertion, let us revisit the previously discussed scene in which Gertie is taking Cassie to school for the first time. After having met the bubblegum boy, Gertie and Cassie finally reach the children's new school. Upon arriving, Gertie first meets with a teacher named Miss Vashinski, then with another parent on her way out, both of whom assure her that her children will "adjust" to their new environment soon enough. "'They'll be all right,' the man said. 'They will' – now he didn't seem himself at all, but was like Miss Vashinski – 'adjust. This school has many children from many places, but in the end they all – most – adjust, and so will yours. They're young.' 'Adjust?' One empty hand pulled a finger of the other empty hand. 'Yes, adjust, learn to get along, like it – be like the others – learn to want to be like the others'" (207). This idea of adjustment becomes a recurring theme in Arnow's novel, and is quintessential to understanding Gertie's development within the text. Consider, for example, the ways in which Gertie's family is fragmented by their inability or refusal to adjust: her oldest son, Reuben, leaves to go back to Kentucky because he refuses to adjust like the others; and Cassie is ultimately killed due to her refusal to separate from Callie Lou, her imaginary playmate and connection to home.

Arnow builds this concept up even further by equating Gertie's experience at the school to her experiences with the factories that she has encountered. After her conversation with the gentleman about adjustment, Gertie decides to leave. "Once

outside, she stopped and turned around and stood a long time staring at the gray building in the square of dirty snow. A look of listening was on her face, for from it there came between the sounds of distant trains and traffic a faint humming – like that from factories she had passed” (208). This connection suggests that Arnow’s use of factory-derived imagery in her descriptions of the school environment is an intentional act meant to equate the factory’s production of material goods with the school’s production of “adjusted” young people who are well-suited to assume their respective roles within the aforementioned factories.

In this way, the connection that Arnow creates between these two institutions seems reminiscent of Louis Althusser’s theory of the reproduction of the conditions of production; in that, both the schools and the factories seek to reproduce the means by which they are most profitable. According to Althusser, this is a common and natural consequence of the capitalist system; in that, factories must strive to perpetuate maximized profitability in order to generate income and outlast any competitors in the industry (1332-1338). Similarly, Arnow’s use of language seems to indicate that the schools also work to produce “adjusted” students who will one day be ready to assume their roles in the factory setting. This system, thereby, implies a certain amount of circularity. Because of this, the school becomes an ideological tool, a conduit for adjustment, by which Gertie’s family is fragmented. This is evidenced later on in the novel when Rueben and Cassie have difficulty adjusting to their new environment, and it is Gertie’s own lack of agency that ultimately leads to her physical loss of them both.

Building upon the idea of circularity with regard to the role of capitalism within the text, one must inevitably consider the conditions by which the main action of the plot

is driven. As aforementioned, the initial reason for the Nevels' relocation is the fact that Clovis, Gertie's husband, was able to get a job as a factory worker in the city when WWII caused a huge outsourcing of manpower from Detroit's factories to the battlefield. Consequently, it was the lure of capitalism and the assurance of upward mobility through hourly wages that drew Clovis to the idea of relocation in the first place. As a victim of the deep-seated patriarchy of the time, Gertie was thereby forced to follow her husband to the city or risk the shame of ridicule by her Fundamentalist Christian family.

Additionally, once Gertie is in Detroit a great deal of her struggle is in acclimating herself with the concepts associated with the capitalist system. We see this as she has difficulty with understanding the concept of money for goods. For example, she questions whether or not the fruit at the fruit truck is worth the price that is being asked for it, as well as whether or not the fruit that has been grown out of season is worth buying at all. The concept of trading money for food, which she had been accustomed to growing on her own while in Kentucky, is a difficult one for Gertie to grasp; but her doing so sets in motion a sequence of events in which Gertie is educated in the ways of the capitalist system that pervades her new environment.

As such, Gertie quickly learns that she can make money in Detroit by selling the dolls and crucifixes that she had carved for pleasure back in Kentucky. As was discussed earlier, Gertie makes the decision to destroy a prized piece of carved cherry wood that she had been working on through the entirety of the text, and which held a great deal of personal significance for her. In the final scene of the novel, she physically destroys the cherry wood with an axe in order to get the base materials necessary to fill an order for dolls and provide for her family. In essence, Gertie's newfound understanding of the

capitalist system, coupled with her ability to perform physical work, provides her with the agency required to become an empowered agent with regard to Burke's pentad.

In this way, capitalism becomes both the means by which Gertie is silenced and disempowered in the beginning of the novel, as she is forced to follow Clovis to the city, and the means by which she is able to re-establish herself as an empowered agent at the end of the novel, as her understanding of capitalism enables her to make the decisions necessary in order to provide for herself and her family. Viewing capitalism in this way accentuates the circular nature with which it functions. But, nonetheless, it is ultimately Gertie's ability to "adjust" to her new environment that provides her with the level of agency required to become empowered through her own sacrificial choices.

#### VIII. Conclusion

By implementing the new, multidisciplinary working-class approach that is suggested by Russo and Linkon into new analyses of Arnow's work, one can work toward an exploration of the novel as it exists outside of its regional aesthetic. My intent, however, is not simply to transition Arnow's work from one literary genre to another; but rather to illustrate the ways in which working-class studies overlaps pre-existing genres. Reading Arnow's novel in this light, and with this level of engagement, will unequivocally yield a more complete understanding of what *The Dollmaker* has to say about both ideology and culture.

Sharon Bannister argues that literature, in general, serves many functions for a student of history; but, the novel, in particular, is the vehicle which usually provides the reader with the most in-depth view of life or of a certain period in time (366). In

perceiving Arnow's work as an accurate, albeit fictional, cross-sectional representation of the historical period in which it is set, one can begin to form a more comprehensive understanding of what the novel has to say with regard to both its historical and contextual relevance; as expressed within the confines of the text itself, and in relation to the anterior corporeal world.

The interdisciplinary field of working-class studies opens up rather than closes off possibilities for reading gender, race, history, and economics, and how they intersect with regional identity. Expanding the critical study of Arnow's work in this way may serve as an example of how working-class studies can create new conversations about long-standing and more recently published texts that feature work and class antagonism as a central theme. Perhaps the implementation of a new working-class lens will provide future scholars with a more comprehensive understanding of both Gertie's personal empowerment and her sense of self throughout the text, as well as open the door for discussion as to other themes and motifs present within the work. Only in furthering the discussions pertaining to the complexities of the text will scholars ever be able to gain real insight into the true power of Harriette Arnow's work.

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