5-2006

A New Writer Indeed: Gender (Re)Imagined in Jack Conroy's "A World to Win"

Andrew Kopec
University of Dayton

A New Writer Indeed: Gender (Re)Imagined in Jack Conroy's *A World to Win*

by
Andrew Kopec

Honorable Mention

2006 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

A New Writer Indeed:

Gender (Re)Imagined in Jack Conroy's *A World to Win*

In 1929, Michael Gold announced the "new writer" of the American proletariat in his oft-quoted, hortatory *New Masses* editorial. Gold wrote, "A new writer has been appearing; a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, and steel mills" (qtd. in Rosenfelt 395). This gendered image of the worker and writer as masculine hardly surprises, given the preponderance of male figures who edited the literary journals, wrote the criticism, and developed the exacting aesthetic criteria of 1930s revolutionary art. Gold's imagined "new writer" would emphasize the life of the "working man": the miner; the locomotive engineer; the farmer (Rosenfelt 396). These words mirrored the militaristic mentality that typified the Left's sense of urgency in their attempts to win the revolution of class and culture during the 1930s.

Jack Conroy, a native Missourian from the small coal-mining town of Moberly, became one of the prominent voices in this proletarian realist revolution, writing such texts as *A World to Win*.[1] Like Gold, Conroy was what Josephine Herbst, a female radical novelist, came to term the radical journal editors and critics of the 1930s: a "head boy" (Rabinowitz 5). Conroy, as a "head boy," then, was a "codifier and disseminator of hegemonic ideas," and acted as a "traditional intellectual," to borrow Gramsci's term (Rabinowitz 43). He was at the helm of revolutionary cultural apparatus like his *Anvil* magazine that routinely published male-authored, radical works, and whose editorial body was predominately male. Speaking with the authority of a figure like, say, Mike Gold, through various literary organs, Conroy exerted a considerable influence in the realm of proletarian art.

---

[1] Deborah Rosenfelt defines proletarian realism as a theory whose basic premise is "that fiction should show the sufferings and struggles and essential dignity of working-class people under capitalism and [should] allow readers to see the details of their lives and work" (388).

Conroy's place in the Midwestern radical movement, however, was often at odds with this "traditional" capacity, creating contradictory tensions in his fiction. As Douglas Wixson, Conroy's chief biographer, suggests, "To Marxist critics the strong regional bias of Midwestern writing and art was backward and reactionary. Similarly, evidence of 'individuality' was considered antiprogressive. Nonetheless, Jack continued his steadfast support of the Party" (375). Thus Conroy's brand of Midwestern radicalism opposed the Party's formal aesthetic specifications, specifications that reflected the International Union of Revolutionary Writers demand that "artistic creation is to be systematized, organized, 'collectivized,' and carried out according to the plans of a central staff like any other soldierly work" (qtd. inHomberger 134). Conroy's *A World to Win*, and its "evidence of 'individuality,'" makes a partial break from this system propagated by the intellectualizing East coast radicals who strictly adhered to the Marxist agenda, privileging class over gender.

The "individuality," then, contradicts Conroy's stance as the "traditional intellectual," and lends itself to considering him, in part, again using Gramsci's terminology, an "organic intellectual."[2] That is, while Conroy produces a text in the manner of a "traditional intellectual,"—a hegemonic "codifier" and "disseminator" that can be seen to align himself with the dogmatism of Gold and his ilk—the text is also the counter-hegemonic text of an "organic intellectual," developed in opposition to the Party's aesthetic criteria and committed to the creation of a Midwestern art.

Accentuating Conroy's oppositional characteristics to the prescriptions of critics like Gold, Conroy had regular contact with Midwestern female radical authors like Herbst. In fact, after Conroy received a "fan" letter from Gold regarding his second novel, *A World to Win*, Herbst found the letter paternalistic, and encouraged Conroy, "Go your own way for god's sake" (qtd. in Wixson

[2] "Organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession…than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong" (Hoare and Smith 3). I am arguing that Conroy "organically" belongs to Midwestern radicalism, a movement focused on individual articulations and distinct from the intellectualizing East coast intellectuals.

xi). Specifically, Herbst wanted Conroy to move toward the novelistic form that his second work would eventually assume.[3] With women like Herbst and Meridel LuSueur, another female radical writer, as colleagues, Conroy attempted to create an organic Midwestern culture—some place to "put down our roots" (Conroy "Conference").[4]

This attempt at cultural genesis included a collaboration of male and female artists, and it inspired Conroy to break from the mold of Gold's "new writer." This attempt also encourages one to consider Conroy a hybrid of a "traditional" and an "organic" intellectual, a theoretical stance that opens new avenues through which to explore gender relations in an era whose male-authored, hegemonic texts often demonstrate little other than reproduced, traditional gender representations. In particular, considering Conroy's text to be, in part, a counter-hegemonic text, created by one with an "organic" sensibility, allows one to see how his second novel attempts to include gender into the discussion that predominately focused on class.

Conroy's *A World to Win* has its share of these reproduced gender representations: it is, in fact, ultimately governed by them. But the text often expresses a very potent social critique in its exploration of gender issues. As Barbara Foley notes of radical novels like *A World to Win*, "Male/female relations in the working class are the object of directed scrutiny. Ideologies of male dominance are linked with false consciousness of other kinds; supportive and caring relations between men and women are linked with political egalitarianism" (234). Conroy's text at times performs this type of close scrutiny, which generally subverts the traditional gender roles in the working-class family.

---

[3] This shift in form from Conroy's first work, *The Disinherited*, a celebrated proletarian text that employs a picaresque narrative, is significant to Wixson. The novelistic form, as he and others argue, allowed Conroy to bring several utterances to the text, and to create, what Bakhtin calls, a carnivalesque effect that creates counter-hegemonic utterances in the text (Wixson xxv). Rabinowitz also cites Jameson as an extension of Bakhtin's argument, but she counters with Armstrong's belief that the novel, ultimately, may participate in the hegemony's production (66-7).

[4] This conference transcript, and other letters of correspondence later referenced, is found at the Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois.

Immediately in the novel, Conroy contrasts Leo Hurley to his younger half-brother, Robert. As Robert is born, his mother, Leo's step-mother, imagines her newborn son as an eventual "great writer," and ostentatiously names him Robert Browning Hurley (22). The name emasculates the boy, and his and Leo's father, a working-class man, Terry, does not approve: "He would be Bob in the man's world he must move in; the Browning part would not last long" (22). Immediately juxtaposed to the feminized newborn, however, is Leo, "rummaging in a clothes closet to find his knife" as his younger brother enters the world. That is, while much of the novel revolves around Robert's quest for manhood, and the class consciousness that such a discovery will ignite, the story of Leo is a realization of class consciousness given his pre-existing masculinity.

Leo's virility causes an intense sexual lust at a young age, a lust that does not abate once he and Anna are married; it simply grows. Later in the novel, as Leo meets Robert's live-in girlfriend, Nell, the narrator notices that "Leo looked at Nell with open admiration and hunger" (185). Speaking to this characteristic "hunger," Paula Rabinowitz extends Meridel LuSueur's argument that "the differentials between male and female bodies [as represented in radical fiction] are located in the belly. The body of the working-class man…is hungry, an empty space once filled by its labor" (3). Moreover, Leo, during a New Year's Eve party, eats and drinks but never reaches satiation: "But they had had a few drinks already, and the warmth was pleasant in Leo's stomach…He had eaten five hamburgers on Danny Maupin, taking one every time Danny asked him if he wanted one" (250). This insatiable hunger ultimately inspires the jobless Leo to move his family back home to the Green Valley where he hopes his father can find him work. That is, the physical hunger for sex and food— a metaphorical extension of his hunger for labor—elicits the uprooting and relocation.

This male image of hunger, however, contrasts LeSueur's imagined working-class female body: a body "pregnant with desire for children" (Rabinowitz 3). Conroy participates in this

gendering, thus Anna's continually impregnated state throughout the novel. Moreover, this state of constant pregnancy—this hyper fertility—negates Leo's sexual hunger for her: "And every time a new baby came Leo was obliged to watch the whole horrible situation. He could never feel the same toward Anna since seeing her in such a gruesome situation" (185). Leo is left hungering for labor. Sex becomes a mere biological act that tries to fill the void, an act that ironically further strains the family's resources and makes Leo's hunger for labor that much more acute.

More significantly, Conroy experiments with reversing traditional gender roles and situates Anna Hurley as the source of household income. Conroy subtly constructs a reality that requires Anna to work, in effect, in two arenas: one in the market and one in the home. That is, Anna produces in the market while simultaneously reproducing in the home. Conroy's representation of this plight even induced LuSueur, as Foley notes, to "[applaud] Conroy for his accurate specification of the relation of gender to class" in her *New Masses* review of the novel (Foley 234, n. 22). Conroy recognizes that women work "double-shifts," and his descriptions of this female experience, at least for LuSueur, are progressive in its fidelity to the female working-class experience.

In this vein, Conroy does well to portray the battle-like atmosphere of Leo and Anna's household, a portrayal that undermines traditional gender roles through women's presence in the labor market. Susan Ware observes, "While the great majority of American women worked as unpaid domestic laborers within their homes, almost 25 percent…worked outside their homes for wages during the [1930s]" (21). But what was the price being paid by these women, working in the home and in the market? Anna Hurley, approaching her breaking point, tells her husband, "I'm afraid I'm losing my mind…I can't stand it! I can't stand it!" (241). Here Conroy foreshadows Anna's her tragic death being caused by an inordinate amount of pressure—pressure ruthlessly applied by the capitalistic fabric in which she and her family are embedded.

Anna's labor, however, furthers Leo's anxiety caused by his lack of labor, an anxiety that seemed to foster universally tension in working-class households. Ware argues that "some of the greatest strain occurred when the man suddenly found himself around the house all the time. The unemployed man's constant presence underfoot led to irritability…There usually came a point when he was asked to help out with the household chores, the ultimate "woman's job" (15). In this vein, Leo Hurley, when Anna refutes his request for a clean shirt, exclaims, "All right! All right! You don't have to keep throwin' it up t' me about you working. It ain't my fault that I ain't working" (249). Anna's incendiary remarks make no reference to Leo's lack of labor: "If you want clean shirts you'll have to wash them yourself" (249). She simply cannot take working in both arenas of the market and the home, especially while pregnant: "She was always stricken with melancholia when she was pregnant" (240). It is Leo's subconscious struggle with his lack of labor, however, essentially emasculating him and leaving him doing "woman's work," that causes his outburst.

The burdens borne by Anna also disfigure her body, leaving her undesirable to her "hungry" husband: "[Her] breasts had become heavy and pendulous…Her legs were knotted here and there…And every time a new baby came Leo was obliged to watch the whole horrible event" (185). Leo sees the distortions of the body he hungered for in youth as the result of her child bearing. Her perpetual reproduction has eradicated the memories of youthful sexual encounters for Leo; of those "heaven-like moments": "Her body now seemed a lump of misshapen dough" (238). Ironically, maternity erases the femininity that Leo desired as a youth, and it leads Leo to replace his desire for his wife with his desire for labor.

These contradictory forces at work in the text—the incommensurability of sexual necessity with an aversion to reproduction—lead Leo to explore abortion as an option for the couple's sixth child. Yet, Leo finds that the doctor cannot legally abort the child and can only offer him "some medicine," though he is "afraid that wouldn't do any good" (236). This exploration of abortion,

however, did not facilitate Conroy's attempts to publish *A World to Win*. Conroy's literary agent, Max Lieber, writes to Conroy in 1932, "While [Walter Ligget] was impressed with the quality of your piece, he had doubts about the incident. He protested that women everywhere knew enough about abortion (like hell they do) so that he failed to see the reason for wasting time on the subject" (Leiber).

Lieber's parenthetical comment here is on point as Ware notes that only the middle and upper classes would have had access to abortion and contraception (63). Consequently, Conroy shirks the publisher's conservatism and includes the topic in his social critique. In doing so, he also destabilizes "Gold's prescriptions of proletarian realism," as Rabinowitz argues (93). Bringing female sexual issues to the fore encourages "feminine entry into class consciousness" and challenges the silencing of female sexuality that is "emblematic of the gaps within the types of… revolutionary fiction that most closely [follows] proletarian realism" (Rabinowitz 92-3).[5] By giving voice to such taboo issues as abortion, Conroy, dispensing with the east coast publishing house's pedantry, reiterates his status as an "organic intellectual," and he lends a progressive hand to the cause of women's rights.

In Leo's world, then, he and Anna have no means to stop the reproduction: they are seemingly bound by biology to reproduce. In an effort to avoid this fate, Leo desperately turns to brutal, alternative ends to abort the child: "The doctor had told Leo that Anna could not stand a trip in the truck. The jolting would surely cause her to miscarry" (302). He then tries to maneuver the car over rough roads; however, his attempt to induce the abortion is thwarted and Anna avoids the miscarriage. Subsequently, this avoidance ends Leo's abortion attempts, but it allows Conroy to construct the crescendo of the text, when Leo and Anna are in a car wreck, leaving Anna mortally

[5] Rabinowitz's analysis here applies to women's radical fiction, but demonstrates the extent to which the east coast's intellectuals' critical theories were hegemonic: the prescriptions were so pervasive that they prevented *women* from voicing their own sexuality.

wounded. As she bleeds to death, Leo helplessly watches the scene unfold: "That's her life coming out of her, that's her life! I got to stop it!...But he couldn't, no matter how he tried"—the world finally beats her down (313). She pays the ultimate price—her life—for her production and reproduction.

Interestingly, the fatal car crash is the result of Fillmore's, a young man, excessive speed: "Leo didn't like so much speed, but he did not feel like protesting" (311). For Leo, it is a situation which renders him powerless: he cannot control the car's speed; he cannot resuscitate the stillborn child; and he cannot save Anna from a world that speeds by her, a world that does not care whether or not a woman dies in a ditch. To assuage this anxiety, then, Leo must embrace the speed of, the immediacy of, the revolution, and he comes to class consciousness, leading a worker's demonstration in the aftermath of the tragic occurrences.

Leo's coming to class consciousness is also problematic. As Foley notes, "*A World to Win* [closes] with valorized portraits of [its] heroes, freed from female encumbrances, bonding with other male organizers" (235). True, Leo is free, but, unlike his brother Robert who *decides* to leave Nell in order to join the revolution, Leo does not leave Anna; the world, the capitalist society, takes Anna from Leo which leads him to class consciousness. This society that causes Anna to bear the dual burden of production and reproduction cannot be reconciled, and Conroy sees no alternative other than to excise Anna from the sway. In her death Leo can see quite clearly that the world to be won is a world that would allow Anna and him—representative extensions of the sexes—to live unencumbered by economic and biological stress.

In the end, Conroy cannot bear his critique to fruition though and it eventually succumbs to the dominant socio-cultural influences at work in and on the text. As Foley notes, tempering her earlier enthusiasm, "To be sure, some of these texts [like *A World to Win*] limit or dilute their critique of traditional assumptions about gender" (235). Conroy must extract Anna from the world

in order for Leo to come to consciousness as the world to be won for Leo is a masculine world, dominated by male artists and workers; but what brings him to consciousness is what the world has done to him *and* Anna. The excessive speed of the capitalist society passes Leo by, leaving him alone and constantly hungry. This society cannot provide the sustenance for working-class people, and the revolution he joins seeks to rein in this speed and to change the world—a world that will include Anna and women like her.

Revealing the gender contradiction defined by Deborah Rosenfelt that faced male-authors,[6] Conroy's work is a variation in the masculine-imaged work of his male and a few female contemporaries. The text ultimately gives voice to the marginalized female producer and reproducer who bears the undue burdens of the home and the market place. His "organic" sensibilities, stoked by his interaction with female colleagues, enable Conroy to challenge critically the dogmatism of Gold's masculine project and, in effect, to break with the paternalistic prescriptions of east coast intellectuals. The sensibilities also attune him to the complexities of gender relationships, and provoke him to proffer an admirable critique.

As Raymond Williams argues, however, all counter-hegemonic productions—like *A World to Win*—"are in practice tied to the hegemonic": the critique behaves asymptotically, bound by the hegemony (114). Consequently, the text must be governed by the pervasive influence of the gender politics of the era. Despite Conroy's "organic" orientation, the virile poetics of Mike Gold and other "head boys" seemed too tough to penetrate completely. The text's significance, nonetheless, lies in its counter-hegemonic position—counter to the gender hierarchies of society and counter to the paternalism of leftist art. Conroy manifests a heightened sensibility nurtured by a web of personal relationships that included women as valued colleagues. Though the proletariat project

[6] The contradiction "between the fact that the world of the Left, like the larger society it both challenged and partook of, was essentially androcentric and masculinist… [and the Left's] consistent concern for women's issues" (394).

ultimately failed, men like Conroy made strides toward establishing that “new writer” that Gold pronounced in 1929, but a writer who also emphasized the life of the working-woman.

Works Cited

Conroy, Jack. *A World to Win*. Chicago: UP Illinois, 2000.

---. "The 1935 American Writers' Conference: A Retrospective." Midwest Conference on Alternative Journalism and Popular Culture. Jack Conroy Papers. Newberry Library Archive, Chicago.

Foley, Barbara. *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.

Hoare, Quintin and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. *Selections from the* Prison Notebooks *of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International, 1992.

Homberger, Eric. *American Writers and Radical Politics, 1930-1939: Equivocal Commitments.* New York: St. Martin's, 1986.

Leiber, Maxim. Letter to Jack Conroy. 20 April 1932. Jack Conroy Papers. Newberry Library Archive, Chicago.

Rabinowitz, Paula. *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depressed America.* Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1991.

Rosenfelt, Deborah. "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition." *Feminist Studies* 7.3 (1981): 371-406.

Ware, Susan. *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.

Wixson, Douglas. Introduction. *A World to Win*. By Jack Conroy. Chicago: UP Illinois, 2000. ix-xxxv.

---. *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990.* Chicago: UP Illinois, 1994.