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‘Beholden to no man’: Artistry and Community in Harriette Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*

Kristina K. Groover

Harriette Arnow’s 1954 novel *The Dollmaker* recalls the great migration of Americans to northern industrial cities during World War II when men gave up their lives as farmers, coal miners, and merchants to join the “war effort.” Lured by the promise of good wages, men such as Arnow’s Clovis Nevels took jobs in factories, manufacturing the guns and munitions that fueled the fighting overseas. While Arnow’s plot traces the largely male themes of industrialism and war, however, *The Dollmaker* is clearly Gertie Nevels’ story. Although Gertie is an inarticulate, often silent presence within both her family and her community, her point of view shapes the novel. Arnow, like many twentieth-century women writers, critiques the canonical narrative through this use of a non-dominant perspective. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has termed this strategy “writing beyond the ending,” a means by which the writer “expresses dissent from an ideological formation by attacking elements of narrative that repeat, sustain, or embody the values and attitudes in question.” Through Gertie’s eyes, Arnow reveals another, untold side of the war years: the experience of women and children uprooted from their homes when their husbands and fathers joined the “war effort,” and of a domestic life threatened by dominant cultural values.

Mirroring this narrative tension between dominant and marginal perspectives is the tension Gertie experiences between her artistic values and oppressive cultural constraints. Gertie, like most female artist figures in literature, lacks either the freedom or the mobility to flee the communal and cultural obligations which threaten her art. Indeed, while commitments to family and community drain much of Gertie’s time and energy, they also shape her artistic expression; her perpetually unfinished carving of a man in cherrywood reflects her complex and often painful relationships.
with her mother, children, husband, and neighbors. This conflict between her community's construction of female roles and Gertie's artistic impulses forms a central tension in Arnow's narrative. Caught in the agonizing, often paralyzing tension between artistic creation and the imperative to sustain family and community relationships, Gertie also experiences the power of those relationships to shape her art.

In the opening chapters of *The Dollmaker*, Arnow establishes clearly her heroine's deviance from the dominant culture in her rural Kentucky homeland. Within a patriarchal community that values traditional sex roles, and powerful, she is unsuited Gertie is an anomaly. Large, ugly, to women's work or dress. While her husband Clovis, a "tinkerer," works sporadically doing odd jobs for neighbors, Gertie single-handedly manages the farm which she and her family share-crop. The abundance and order evident in her neatly planted rows testify to her competence and self-sufficiency. When Clovis and most of the other men in the community enter the army, leaving behind a community of women and children, Gertie easily assumes the men's chores, lifting heavy loads and comforting women who are frightened by staying alone.

Although Gertie is well-suited to the physical demands of farm life, however, her rural community is no pastoral Eden. In Kentucky and, later, in Detroit, the community represents both a source of support and a threat to Gertie's autonomy, its members enforcing a narrowly defined social code even as they provide companionship and emotional support. When Clovis fails to return from his army examination, Gertie joins the women who gather anxiously at the store each day to wait for the mail. In the absence of husbands and sons, doctors and farmers, the women form a supportive community who comfort, encourage, and perform small chores for one another. This same community, however, would prohibit Gertie from realizing her dream of buying a farm of her own, the Tipton Place. Gertie knows well her community's belief that "[a] woman's got no business traden round without her man." In order to achieve her dream of owning land, she must subvert these communal values: she saves her money secretly, stashing it in small bills in the hem of her coat and conspiring only with her children.

In Gertie's role as an artist, too, she deviates from culturally accepted norms. Rather than learning from her mother to do "fancywork," Gertie learned from her father to whittle: a hobby
which her mother "had ever hated . . . even in her father — and in a
girl it had seemed almost a sin" (68) In the traditional male
Kunstlerroman, the protagonist’s artistic gifts set him apart from the
community; like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, he remains as remote as
"the God of creation . . . invisible, refined out of existence,
indifferent, paring his fingernails." Gertie’s artistry, however,
reinforces her connection to the community. She uses her artistic
skill to care for her family, creating hand-carved tools and
furniture, homemade toys, and woven baskets. Thus Gertie’s
domestic arts challenge both her culture’s definition of appropriate
female behavior and the patriarchal concept of the artist as one
aloof from family life.

Arnow establishes the connection between Gertie’s artistry and
her nurturance of her family in the novel’s powerful opening scene,
in which Gertie saves the life of her infant son. Gertie must make
the perilous trip into town with her sick child because the doctor
closest to her home has been called into the army. She rides to the
nearest paved road on a mule, forcibly hijacks a car carrying
soldiers into town, and performs an emergency tracheotomy on t he
child with her whittling knife when it becomes clear that he will not
survive the trip. Gertie’s artistry — her skill with her knife — is
thus associated with her ability to sustain and preserve life. The
soldiers’ resistance to helping her illustrates the conflict between
their “important business” — the killing and destruction of war —
and Gertie’s life-saving mission (15). Throughout The Dollmaker,
Gertie’s life-sustaining art is violated by the war and its attendant
threats to domestic life: violence, industrialism, poverty.

Gertie’s autonomy is further threatened by the hill community’s
oppressive fundamentalist religion. This rigid faith and its wrathful
God are embodied by the appropriately-named Battle John Brand, a
preacher who “[stampedes] the souls of his flock to Christ with his
twin whips of hell and God” (68). Gertie, whose ungainly body will
not conform to the strictures of torturous Sunday clothes any more
than her mind will bend to Battle John’s gospel of damnation,
endures these services in “sweaty-handed guilt and misery” (68).
While fundamentalist religion in The Dollmaker threatens to thwart
the female hero’s autonomy, Gertie’s own religious vision is
intimately connected to her dream of independence. Her
foundation, she asserts, is “not God but what God had promised
Moses: land” (128). When Gertie’s beloved brother Henley dies in
the war, leaving her enough money to buy the Tipton Place, she
tells herself wonderingly that “It was as if the war and Henley’s death had been a plan to help set her and her children free so that she might live and be beholden to no man, not even to Clovis” (139). By her community’s standards, Gertie’s personal and religious vision is heretical; she dreams of freedom from her husband’s authority and casts her wayward brother as a Christ-figure, usurping Biblical describe his sacrificial death.

Gertie’s artistic and religious visions merge in her unfinished carving of a human figure, whose enigmatic identity mirrors Gertie’s own struggle to identify herself as an artist, a wife and mother, and a person of faith. When she is secure in her relationship to the land, Gertie’s vision seems sure; after inheriting Henley’s money, she muses that “when Clovis was gone and she was settled on the farm, she would work again on the block of wood . . . She had her land — as good as had it — and the face was plain, the laughing Christ, a Christ for Henley” (81). When she loses the Tipton Place to her community’s demand that she follow Clovis to Detroit, however, Gertie’s religious and artistic visions falter. Increasingly, she sees in the wood not the face of Christ, but that of Judas: “’Not Judas with his mouth all drooly,’ ” she explains, “’his hand held out fer th silver, but Judas given th thirty pieces away. I figger . . . they’s many a one does meanness fer money — like Judas . . . But they’s not many like him gives th money away and feels sorry onc’t they’ve got it ‘”(23). Gertie’s sympathy with the repentant Judas suggests her own sense of guilt about the betrayal of values, both her own and those of her community. Constrained by oppressive social and religious codes, she is unable to sustain her artistic vision.

While the artist-hero in the male Künstlerroman chooses exile as a means to artistic achievement, Gertie’s exile from the community is both externally imposed and unwelcome. In contrasting Gertie’s departure for Detroit with Clovis’, Arnow illuminates the female artist’s lack of freedom and autonomy. Clovis’ decision is made independently and secretly; his quest follows the pattern of the traditional masculine hero in American fiction, carrying him away from home and family ties which he perceives as restrictive and entrapping. Despite the dramatic impact of his decision on his family, he faces neither judgment nor repercussion. Rather, Clovis is lauded by his community for joining the “war effort” and supported by the cultural demand that his wife and children join him. Gertie, however, knows no such freedom as she faces the
tension between her own values and desires and those of her community. Her wish to be “beholden to no man” creates a dramatic conflict with her culture, which demands that a woman “‘Leave all else an cleave to thy husband’” (124). Bowing to religious and community strictures, Gertie concedes: It’s what a woman’s got to do, I reckon — Foller — take on a man’s kind a life like Ruth’” (358). As Gertie moves with her children to Detroit, exchanging her deeply rooted life in Kentucky for a rootless “man’s kind a life,” she compromises both her family relationships and her art.

In Detroit, estranged from the land that sustained her, Gertie is alienated from her own moral and artistic vision. Leaving her mountain home behind, she enters a world in which all signs of nature are obscured: the sky is perpetually the even grey of industrial smoke, and the hills are not hills at all, but great slag piles. Although the family moves in order to pursue Clovis’ dream of freedom and individualism, Gertie’s experience of Detroit is one of restriction and conformity as, looking from the doorway of their cramped apartment, she sees “another door exactly like her own” (170). The kitchen, to which she is tied by the obligation to feed her family, becomes a central symbol of Gertie’s enclosure. Far from the farming community where she had been one to whom others turned for help and strength, Gertie is made to feel incompetent and helpless by mysterious kitchen appliances, poor quality, rationed food, and the shame of buying on credit. Searching for an escape from her stifling kitchen, Gertie finds that “A corner of the pulled out table barred her way. She looked toward the passway. Clovis’ chair was there” (188). As she stands, unable to move, in a corner of her kitchen, Gertie is literally trapped by domestic responsibility.

In Detroit, as in Kentucky, the community endorses an oppressive social code that threatens Gertie’s autonomy and individualism. The war factories have attracted families from all over the country with the promise of jobs, and industrial Detroit is a clashing, volatile mixture of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. For the first time in their lives, Gertie and her family encounter prejudice; they are labeled “hillbillies,” the word spat at them “as if ... a vile thing to be spewed out quickly” (156). Here, as in Kentucky, Gertie’s individualism is a liability. The way of survival in the alley is to “‘adjust . . . be like the others — learn to want to be like the others’” (207). Increasingly perceiving herself as
a traitor to her children and to her art, Gertie finds that her vision of a laughing Christ is gradually replaced by that of a penitent Judas. While Clytie and Enoch adjust quickly to the new school and to the loud, violent play of the children in the alley, Reuben and Cassie, the children who are most like Gertie in their artistic sensitivity and love for the land, are ill-suited for this new and harsh environment. Gertie blames herself for Reuben’s independent ways; bending to community pressure, she urges him to “’try harder to be like the rest’” (340). When Reuben runs away, returning to Kentucky to live with his grandparents, Gertie is plagued with guilt at her betrayal. Searching through her Bible for guidance and comfort, she returns always to the description of Judas: “‘I have sinned in that I betrayed innocent blood’... And he cast down the pieces of silver... and went away and hanged himself” (361). Believing that she has betrayed her son, Gertie increasingly identifies with the sorrowful, repentant Judas.

Cassie, like Reuben, is ostracized from the community because of her imaginative independence. Seeing her playing alone with her imaginary friend, Callie Lou, the alley children take up the cry of “‘Cuckoo.’” Pressured by Clovis and by the other mothers in the alley, Gertie decides that Cassie, too, must sacrifice for the sake of their life in the community: “Reuben was lost to her, the alley had the others, Henley was dead, his money gone, the land lost... Giving up, giving up; now Cassie had to do it” (379). While Gertie can banish Callie Lou, however, she cannot destroy her; the “witch child” embodies Cassie’s imaginative spirit and her love for her lost home in Kentucky. Cassie takes refuge in the railroad yard, where she can play with Callie Lou far from her mother’s reproachful eye. As Gertie struggles desperately to reach her in time, Cassie is killed while sheltering Callie Lou from an approaching train. At the hospital, an unbelieving Gertie insists that the money she has saved through the years to buy her land will get her child out of the cold, windowless place. She lays it in Clovis’ “startled, trembling hands: the old bills, the ones in balls, in tiny squares, the bill with the pinpricks through Lincoln’s eyes, the dominecker hen money...” (411). Gertie becomes the picture of the repentant Judas she imagined in the wood: she tries to give the money back, to undo the death in which she is complicit, but she is too late. Obsessed with guilt, she finds that “if she tore herself from Cassie, there was Reuben waiting, and if from Reuben, the lost land called, and then became a lost life with lost children” (459).
In her despair following Cassie’s death, Gertie tries to immerse herself in her art, working obsessively on the cherrywood figure: "[a]ll her life she’d needed time for this, and now she had time only, years and years of it to get through" (415). When Clovis goes on strike, however, the needs of her family encroach once again on Gertie’s time and energies. When a neighbor in the alley asks Gertie to carve a crucifix for him, she hesitates; the Christ this man is seeking is not the laughing Christ of her imagination, but a Christ “her mother would have liked: the head drawn back in agony, the thorns, the nails, each with a drop of crimson below it, a great splash of scarlet for the wounded side, the face bearing many wrinkles to indicate agony ...” (236-37). But the man is willing to pay fifteen dollars for what he wants, and Gertie’s children are hungry; for the sake of her family, she compromises both her art and her religious vision for “the weary work of whittling for money as another directed” (322). She learns to use a makeshift jigsaw Clovis brings home to make jumping jack dolls from a pattern; hating the work of “creating ugliness,” she nonetheless feels “ever more guilty at the time wasted on the man in the wood” (555).

Although the oppressive ethic of conformity that rules this urban world threatens Gertie’s art and her family, she discovers that in Detroit, as in Kentucky, the female community forms a subculture of care and support which challenges a dominant culture marked by bigotry and violence. Divided by language, ethnicity, and prejudice, the women are nonetheless united by the need to feed their families and care for their children in this cruel urban environment. When word of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima reaches the alley, the bigoted Mrs. Daly forgets her hatred of “them Japs” in her sympathy for their neighbor, Mrs. Saito, whom she hears weeping at night through the thin walls of their apartment: “ ‘Why them Japs live something like this ... all crowded up tuggedder inu towns; little cardboard houses kinda like what we’ve got; and maybe lotsa — you know — kids’ ” (496). The women’s daily activities — caring for one another’s children, carrying food to sick or troubled neighbors, tending straggly flower gardens in an effort to transcend the alley’s ugliness — sustain life even as the dirty, dangerous work in the war factories and the increasing violence of union activities threaten it.

Gertie’s commitment to feeding her family ultimately decides both the fate and the identity of her carving. As the Nevels savings dwindle, Gertie takes the cherrywood figure to the scrapwood lot
to have it sawed into boards for whittling figures she can sell. Seeing the face still partially submerged in the beautiful wood, the scrapwood man cannot bring himself to cut it; it is Gertie who swings the ax into the bent head. The man gazes at the place where the face should have been: "Christ you meant it tu be — butcha couldn't find no face fu him." Gertie shakes her head:

'No, they was many would ha done; they's millions an millions a faces plenty fine enough — fer him.' She pondered, then slowly lifted her glance from the block of wood, and wonder seemed mixed in with the pain. 'Why, some a my neighbors down there in th alley — they would ha done.' (599)

As Gertie sacrifices the cherrywood figure, Arnow seems to suggest that the image hidden in the wood is, after all, that of Christ. The splitting of the figure is a symbolic crucifixion, the wood giving way with a "crying, rendering sound" suggesting a voluntary giving up of wholeness and of life. It is only in sacrificing for the sake of her family, however, that Gertie finds a face for this Christ; neither hidden within her imagination nor lost with the land, it has been with her all along, living in the alley in the faces of her neighbors. The true face, the true presence of Gertie's Christ — and the true expression of her artistic vision — is to be found not in isolated, solitary pursuit, but in the familial and communal life of the alley.

In Gertie's sacrifice of the cherrywood figure, Arnow offers a vision of the woman artist's unique quest, countering what DuPlessis has termed "the modernist tradition of exile, alienation, and refusal of social roles" (101). Gertie, unlike the male protagonist of the traditional Kunstlerroman, does not flee the restrictions imposed by family and community; rather, her art reflects the sometimes torturous tension between relationship and artistic expression. The Christ of Gertie's artistic and spiritual imagination is one who loves people and who dwells in the congested alley, in the faces of her flawed and very human neighbors. Arnow's The Dollmaker thus acknowledges the intimate connection between the female artist's vision and her ties to this community, its frailties and its transcendent spirit.
Notes


2A number of recent works have treated the unique struggles and obstacles faced by the female artist as depicted in literature; see especially Linda Huf, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1983). Lee Edwards, in Psyche As Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), devotes a chapter to the female artist as hero, examining Arnow's The Dollmaker along with Toni Morrison's Sula and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eves Were Watching God. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, in The Female Hero in American and British Literature (New York: Bowker, 1981), also discuss Gertie Nevels as an artist-hero; in my view, however, they misread the novel by treating it as a tragedy in which Gertie's "distrust of her own heroic perceptions and impulses destroys not only herself but also her family" (58).

In "A Portrait of the Artist as Mother: Harriette Arnow and The Dollmaker" (Georgia Review 33 (Winter 1979): 851-66), Glenda Hobbs views Gertie's situation as a parallel to Arnow's own, writing that "in this novel Arnow depicts as impossible what she in fact achieves: reconciling motherhood with the demands of an artist" (861). While I do not agree that artistic expression proves "impossible" for Gertie, Hobbs provides an enlightening discussion of Arnow as mother and artist.


5As DuPlessis notes, muted or hidden artwork often has particular significance in the female artist novel because "it is precisely expression and the desire to refuse silence that are at issue in artistic creation" (85).