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The Remaking of *The Dollmaker*

*Linda Pannill*

When the arts enter such arenas as television or government, certain projects take on ritual significance—Robert Frost at the Kennedy inauguration, for example. What happens is less important than the fact that it is happening. In television most attention comes in advance, as promotion rather than commentary, even with ambitious projects like the TV version of *Roots*. Little critical attention is paid afterward. Publicity for the recent television film of *The Dollmaker* stressed Jane Fonda’s campaign, starting in 1971, to produce a screen version of Harriette Arnow’s novel. Movie studios did not consider the story commercial, but apparently the star’s prestige was enough to interest television. The result was a three hour made-for-TV film on ABC, 13 May 1984, Mother’s Day. Jane Fonda played the leading role, with Levon Helm (the father in *Coal Miner’s Daughter*) as her husband and Geraldine Page as her mother. The director, Daniel Petrie, previously directed *Sybil* and *Eleanor and Franklin*, also television adaptations of books about women. Because both the novel and the television film merit critical attention, my aim here is to change the focus awhile from the phenomenon of the making of the film to the way it is made. In particular, I analyze an unwise alteration of the novel’s heroine. In turn, I show how this change might be attributable to the idea of the importance of making a film of *The Dollmaker*, to a kind of internal promotion.

*The Dollmaker*, a best-seller thirty years ago, has always had readers among those interested in Appalachian literature and women writers, but it is not a famous book. As Tillie Olsen says in *Silences*, this is one of those novels dealing with motherhood and the work of ordinary women which typically suffer “the death of being unknown, or at best a peculiar eclipsing.”¹ *The Dollmaker* opens in Ballew, Kentucky, where Gertie Nevels and her children work a tenant farm while her husband, Clovis, who hates farming and loves machinery, drives a coal truck and does odd jobs. Gertie is an unusual heroine, large and rawboned—quite different from
the young girl on the cover of my Avon paperback edition, with her pouting mouth and tumbling hair (remarkably like Jane Fonda in early roles). Gertie is very strong: in the great opening chapter she rides a mule onto a highway with her baby, Amos, in her arms, running an army officer's car off the road, insisting on a ride to the doctor in town. The baby is choking. When she realizes there's no time, Gertie takes out a knife and opens his throat, saving his life.

The local doctor has been taken by the army, and most of the men have left the hills for the service or defense plants. Without telling Gertie, Clovis leaves for Detroit and a job as a factory mechanic. Gertie, who has secretly hoarded her money because Clovis would have spent it on a truck, plans to buy a farm, expecting her husband to send money and to return at the end of the war. Instead he sends for the family, and Gertie's pious, mean-spirited mother presses her into obeying her husband. In doing so, Gertie betrays what she thinks is right for the children and herself, and gives up her one dream, owning land.

In Detroit the Nevels family lives in a rickety housing project, "Merry Hill." Harriette Arnow, who grew up in the hills of Kentucky, lived in such a project herself during World War II, while her husband worked as a reporter. She took care of their child and wrote, when she could. She conveys the crowdedness, heat, cold, and fumes that muddy the clear spring of Gertie's mind. Suddenly Gertie is too big, ugly, and wrong, a "hillbilly." She is abashed by her husband, who seems at home, and is unable to protect her children. The oldest, Reuben, runs away to Kentucky, while the middle children, Clytie and Enoch, "adjust" all too easily, learning to sneer at people like their mother. Cassie, the child most like Gertie, is miserable and distracted. In a chapter which no one who has read the novel could forget, Cassie is playing in the freight yard when a train runs over her, severing her legs. The mother, who has seen her daughter on the tracks, cannot get through the narrow opening in the fence in time to save her. The hoarded money pays for Cassie's burial. The death is an analogue to the deterioration of Gertie's inner life, which had been sustained by her roles as mother, farmer, and carver of wood. She has always "whittled" useful objects as well as animals and dolls for Cassie. Although she does not think of herself as a sculptor, the dollmaker is something unusual in literature, a woman artist. Now her husband and son Enoch urge her to make jumping jack
Jane Fonda as Gertie Nevels. Courtesy of the American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.
dolls and crucifixes to sell in the project, not all hand carved as before but cut out on a jigsaw, one more of the machines which control their lives. The gimcrack dolls with their dangling legs represent all the terrible changes.

This novel is six hundred pages long, a problem when it comes to adapting it for the screen. Jane Fonda has said one reason *The Dollmaker* was made for television instead of motion pictures was the failure to arrive at an acceptable two hour screenplay. The teleplay used is by Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn, the actor, who also collaborated on *Foxfire* (1980), a stage play set in Appalachia and based on materials from the *Foxfire* books. Their work on *The Dollmaker* is careful. Almost all of the dialogue and incidents come from the novel. Some characters, subplots, and episodes are left out, but the resulting story is shapely and seems complete. Those elements are kept in the script which are effective visually: On the day the family arrives in Detroit, in a snowstorm, an iceman lumbers into the kitchen, demanding money for ice they didn't order, while, absurdly, the window behind him fills with falling snow. This is an image of the unnaturalness and wasteful expense of the family's new life and an example of the power of film to convey simultaneity. The writers also do an effective job of condensing the rather prolix novel by combining several scenes into one and by telescoping the material within a scene. For instance, in the opening chapter of the novel, as Gertie looks for a stick to keep her child's throat open, she sees a recruiting poster for war workers and slashes it with her knife. In the film she pries it from the tree to place under the child. This is the sort of adjustment that enhances the original material.

No novel is perfect, of course, and *The Dollmaker* is not. Moreover, filmmakers always have the privilege of changing a text. In fact, they must make changes. The viewer has the right to judge the result. To my mind, *The Dollmaker* is changed in such a way that the film constitutes a reinterpretation, one I cannot accept. This change is most apparent in the ending, which is turned into a happy one. Harriette Arnow's story finishes with a scene of destruction. Throughout, an important symbol, almost an obtrusive one, has been a block of cherry wood Gertie brings from Kentucky with plans for an ambitious carving, possibly of Christ, although the image in the wood keeps shifting in her imagination. Now, however, she takes the half-finished carving to a scrap-wood lot to be sawn into pieces to fit the jigsaw. Gertie, once a carver
of ax handles, borrows an ax to make the first cut herself, splitting the wood. At the very end, when the scrap-wood man says she destroyed the Christ because she could not find a face for it, Gertie disagrees:

She shook her head below the lifted ax. "No. They was so 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."

The ending is problematical. Arnow has been quoted as saying there is hope, but not all readers are left with that impression. Some reviewers expressed confusion about the ending or dissatisfaction with it. The few literary critics who have discussed The Dollmaker are more or less divided as to the implications of the last pages. On the one hand, there are those who see them as hopeful, noting Gertie's recognition of the commonality of suffering and, perhaps, her incorporation of the carving's Christ-like aspects. On the other hand, there are those—like me—more impressed by the destruction taking place. We see Gertie's last words as a culmination of the suffering throughout the novel, not a reversal. Joyce Carol Oates, in an important essay on The Dollmaker, rightly calls it a tragedy in which relentless forces destroy the protagonist. Obviously, Gertie is defeated as an individual—and as a woman artist who gives up her art. If she is Christ-like, it is in suffering and not in the power to save anyone, even herself. Her destruction is more terrible because the final blows are self-inflicted. The description of the splitting of the cherry wood block underlines the pain of the act, pain displaced to the wood itself:

She was so still; it was as if by steadfastly looking at the wood, she, too, had changed into the wood. . . . She struck the ax with the hammer, but weak she seemed, her sweat-slippery hands sliding from the hammer, her hands forever fumbling; but at last the wood cried out, opening a crack wide enough for the wedge. . . . The wood, straight-grained and true, came apart with a crying, rendering sound. . . . (pp. 598-99)
Irronymally, after Gertie destroys the Christ she realizes she might have found a face for it, after all.

In the film of The Dollmaker, however, the same scene is presented as unequivocally joyous, a release. Significantly, the protagonist's statement that one of her neighbors could be a model for Christ comes before the wood is split, not after, so no regrets can be inferred. The swinging of the ax is approached from a low camera angle and in slow motion, while Jane Fonda/"Gertie" splits the wood with a happy expression on her face, as if destroying her own unhappiness. The scene is changed because the context is changed: In the television play Gertie has decided to take the initiative in returning the family to the mountains. The fact that in the film Gertie wields an unusual double-headed ax, a well-known symbol, from ancient times, of matriarchal rule, is an appropriate device—even if the symbolism isn't intended. At the end Gertie is shown driving the truck taking her family to Kentucky. For viewers to accept the return to the farm as a happy ending, they must forget Clovis's dislike of farm life and Clytie and Enoch's taste for life in the city, as well as the economic pressures on the family, the same pressures that kept so many immigrants from Appalachia in the North after the war. In Arnow's 1970 novel The Weedkiller's Daughter, set in Detroit in the 1960s, there is a character like Gertie Nevels (called "The Primitive") who lives alone on a farm outside the city, a fate more consistent with developments in The Dollmaker.

The paramount objection to the happy ending is that in order to make it probable, the character of Gertie has been simplified. She is presented as a sort of Superwoman, capable of anything. Gertie in the novel certainly is bigger in scale than those around her: stopping the army car and then holding onto it, reaching from her bed to the doorway without getting up, putting her arm out of the window to pull a child off the roof. This aspect of the character is conveyed well in Jane Fonda's performance. She appears larger than she is—much larger than Levon Helm—and awkward. Low camera angles and a wardrobe of waistless and scant dresses and heavy shoes and sweaters help enhance this impression. The difference in dimension between Gertie and others is reinforced for the viewer by the actress's fame and by the amateurishness of a number of the other performances. Local people were cast in various roles, including the children's. The accents may be authentic, but some of the players speak as though
they are recalling their lines, and at times Jane Fonda looks as though she is encouraging them to talk, which distracts us from the obscure mountain woman to the famous actress who undertook to make this film. The heroine's stature is, of course, only part of the story. When Harriette Arnow compares Gertie to Samson, she reminds us of what can happen when giants go down from the hills into the cities. So when an ABC promotional announcement shows a picture of Jane Fonda swinging an ax, with a voice-over saying, "The dollmaker—a woman with enough love and courage to turn her dreams into triumphs," the message of the television play is conveyed, but not that of the book.

What is left out of the film is the damage done to Gertie by circumstances. One pattern of symbolism, the Judas motif, is eliminated. At times, in the novel, Gertie does not know whether the figure in the cherry wood is Christ or Judas. Actually, she sympathizes with Judas because his suffering was fated, as inescapable as Christ's. The novel is naturalistic in that people are compromised by forces they cannot control. More and more Gertie comes to see herself as a Judas, a betrayer: when she takes the children to Detroit, when she allows a legacy from her brother who died in the war to be spent on installment buying instead of on land, when she does not speak out against the murder she suspects her husband of committing with her knife, when she makes jigsawed dolls and crosses instead of handcarved ones. Her destruction of the Christ in the wood may also be seen as a Judas-act. Most important, in Detroit she betrays her children when she feels she has to urge them to adjust: "Say with th crowd," she says to Clytie (p. 520). In the novel, when Reuben gets into trouble his mother tries to help him:

"Reuben, it's all your ole fool mammie's fault like you said. I've been stiff-necked an stubborn in the face uv . . ." What? She couldn't say God. "Honey, try harder to be like th rest—tu run with th rest—it's easier, an you'll be happier in th end—I guess." (p. 340)

In the corresponding scene in the film, she does not tell him to adjust. She says she hasn't made herself over for Detroit. In the novel, that line is Reuben's: "I ain't a quitten now. I ain't a maken myself over fer Detroit. I ain't a standen a taken nobody's lies—like you done" (pp. 316-17). In the novel, Gertie betrays Cassie
when she tells her to give up her imaginary playmate, Callie Lou, hoping the child will then fit in with other children in the project. Because Callie Lou goes to live in the freight yard, this decision leads indirectly to Cassie's death. In the film, the mother's guilt is diluted because it is not Gertie who first tells Cassie there isn't any Callie Lou, but Clovis.

These changes alter the nature of the protagonist and the meaning of the story. The most notable instance is the addition of a confrontation scene between wife and husband. This takes place after Cassie's death, while the family is short of money. Gertie comes home from shopping to find Enoch painting her jumping jacks garish colors, his father's idea. When Clovis enters with more doll pieces from the jigsaw, Gertie complains of needing money for food, only to be told by Clovis that if he had known about the money she'd saved, he would have made her stay in Kentucky to buy a farm. When she protests ("You sold the cow for tires"), he replies, "I wanted you to have what you wanted," which is not true either. In the novel, Clovis says these things to Gertie on two occasions. The first time, she starts to talk back: "But you never wanted a farm—Mom didn't want me to—Oh, Lord." Dropping on the bed, turning her face to the wall, she begins to accept the accusation that the family's troubles—and Cassie's death—are her fault: "Git away. I allus thought you'd want my money fer a truck—She'd still been alive" (p. 427). The next time Clovis says she should have bought the farm, she mumbles something and leaves the room, unhanded by her emotions. Not in the film. For a moment Gertie quietly whittles at the face of a jumping jack, until Clovis rebukes her for spending time carving faces instead of painting them. Then Gertie speaks:

Don't tell me what to do. All my life I been doin' what I was told. First Ma and then you. . . . You never cared what I wanted. You never asked. . . . You've gone your own way always, Clovis, and I've had to go too. Well, these dolls, this is all that's feeding our youngens now, and they're mine!

She shakes a jumping jack at Clovis/Levon Helm. Its little fat face is oddly like his. "Don't tell me to do it your way. I ain't doin' it no more," she says, knocking all the painted dolls from the table while Clovis just nods. Now, this is dramatically effective, especially the use of the dolls as visual images. Also, as the point
at which Gertie takes over the family's destiny, it is necessary to the new ending. But it violates the complex and tragic nature of the heroine as she is depicted in the novel. In an unpublished précis of the book, Harriette Arnow writes that when Clovis tells Gertie she should have stayed in Kentucky she cannot think of a thing to reply. Throughout the novel Gertie is obedient to her husband, as she was taught, and she is inarticulate, except in wood. This is evident when she tries to call through the freight yard fence to Cassie playing on the railroad tracks but can't be heard over the sound of an airplane overhead—and the train.

I believe Jane Fonda wished to make a feminist statement by filming The Dollmaker. In getting this picture about a working woman made, Fonda played something of a heroine's part herself, finding it difficult to overcome opposition, despite her extraordinarily privileged status. If, when The Dollmaker was aired, reporters and reviewers focused on the phenomenon of its existing at all, that was not surprising. As an event, it had symbolic importance. As a feminist, I approved.

This is all the more reason to evaluate carefully the film itself, however. I cannot help seeing a connection between the way it was publicized and the changes in the story which have been described here. The script promotes a facile version of feminism, one we are all familiar with, which says if an individual woman is strong willed enough she can "turn her dreams into triumphs." This way of thinking does not show an understanding of the pressures in women's lives, which cannot always be overcome. When we are shown how things ought to be instead of how they are, the merely human women who watch the teleplay are shamed—and our intelligence is insulted. Is the happy ending a condescension to the television audience in particular? Like so much on TV it tells us solutions are easy, turning big problems into little ones. As in all melodrama, the plot at the end is shaped by wishes. The message is aimed at Gertie Nevels—"This is what you ought to do"—rather than being about her. Jane Fonda swings the ax, not Gertie.

In art, true feminism is the power of looking at women and men. Harriette Arnow has that power. She knows that we go to literature to learn about ourselves and about people who are different, not to be comfortable, or she would not have written the harrowing scene in which Gertie tries to save her daughter from mutilation and death, and fails. After that, how could the story be
true without being tragedy? Isn’t Harriette Arnow, with her power of sympathy (love, really) and her courage of seeing and making us watch, herself the exemplary heroine? These skillful playwrights and this gifted actress have given us a good drama, but they could have given us a better one, that ended as the novel does, tragically.

Notes

I wish to thank Anne G. Campbell and Claire McCann, Special Collections, M. I. King Library, University of Kentucky, and Sally W. Maggard, University of Kentucky Appalachian Center, for their assistance with this project.

3Harriette Arnow, The Dollmaker (1954; rpt. New York: Avon, 1972), 599. All further references to this work appear in the text.
6Wilton Eckley, Harriette Arnow, Twayne’s United States Authors Series, No. 245 (New York: Twayne, 1974), 100 (“In her final symbolic act of splitting the block of wood, she does not destroy her Christ, but brings him alive—for He cannot be abstracted or fixed; He must live in people”); Dorothy H. Lee, “Harriette Arnow’s The Dollmaker: A Journey to Awareness,” Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 20 (1978): 98 (“She is not defeated but has rather taken a step toward spiritual exit from the place of the damned”); Frances M. Malpezzi, “Silence and Captivity in Babylon: Harriette Arnow’s The Dollmaker,” Southern Studies 20 (1981): 90 (“Her story is both a tragic one and a heroic one. Tragic in that it presents the narrative of thwarted potential, unfulfilled dreams. . . . Heroic in that it presents a portrait of one whose courage and endurance withstand the assaults of mundane realities”). Lee R. Edwards asserts that the destruction of the statue is necessary because Gertie is “an artist whose medium is life” (Psyche as Hero [Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press], 1984, 235).
"Arline R. Thorn, "Harriette Arnow's Mountain Women," Bulletin of the West Virginia Association of College Teachers of English 4 (1977): 8 ("If the family survives, it is because Gertie sacrifices everything that has beauty and meaning to herself alone"); Hobbs, p. 861 ("[I]n this novel Arnow depicts as impossible what she in fact achieves: reconciling motherhood with the demands of an artist"); Rigney, p. 16 ("There is no room for art in Gertie's universe, only for survival"). Kathleen Walsh finds the essay "an equivocal one . . . described in terms which deepen the ambiguity" ("Free Will and Determinism in Harriette Arnow's The Dollmaker, SAR 49 [1984]: 103.

Joyce Carol Oates, "Afterword," The Dollmaker, 602.

Typescript, Box 8, Folder 23, Harriette Arnow Papers, Special Collections, M. I. King Library, University of Kentucky."