A native of pre-Cumberland-Dam Burnside, Kentucky, who, from her late teens through her early thirties, taught in a one-room school in rural Pulaski County, served an apprenticeship as a writer in Cincinnati, tried subsistence farming on the Big South Ford of the Cumberland, and finally moved to Detroit in 1944, Harriette Simpson Arnow came naturally to the subject matter of her best-known novel, *The Dollmaker*. Published in 1954, *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 an urban existence. Such a focus proves hardly surprising -- or unwarranted -- give Arnow's graphic depiction of an almost demonic industrial Detroit, but a concentration on Gertie as victim of the city can obscure our understanding of one of the most important issues the novel raises. In *The Dollmaker* -- and, in fact, in much of her best work -- Harriette Arnow sets forth a complex, coherent, and largely unexamined vision of life in the hill country of southeastern Kentucky during the first half of the twentieth century and her vision not only evokes the natural beauty of the region and the innate dignity of its inhabitants, but also carefully depicts the forces -- internal and external -- contributing to the ultimate demise of an agriculturally based and highly distinctive mountain existence.

Arnow develops her portrait of twentieth-century mountain life in her first two novels, *Mountain Path* (1936) and *Hunter's Horn* (1949), as well as in *The Dollmaker*. Set in the late twenties, late thirties to early forties, and mid-forties, respectively, the three novels paint a fairly consistent picture of life in the hills of southeastern Kentucky: isolation, poverty, illiteracy, even moonshining and violence, exist alongside a rich and intimate involvement with nature and an immediate, fulfilling relationship to the daily experience of living. As Arnow notes in the Introduction to the 1963 re-issue of *Mountain Path*, "for those who like open fires, hounds, children, human talk and song instead of TV and radio, the wisdom of the old who had seen all of life from birth to death, none of it hidden behind institutional walls, there was a richness of human life and dignity [in the pre-World War II Kentucky mountains] seldom found in the United States today." Arnow's novels also present, however, a growing tension between this way of life and the demands of a modern world, a tension which culminates in the Kentucky portion of *The Dollmaker*. In these opening nine chapters, on which I would like to concentrate, Arnow argues that mid-twentieth-century subsistence farmers like Gertie Nevels can no longer maintain their traditional manner of living, not only because the war has intruded into their world, but also because agriculture, as they conceive of and practice it, can no longer sustain them and their families.

To understand Arnow's analysis of mountain life, then, we must first understand Gertie's distinctively American conception of the land and of agriculture, a conception suggested by certain of her firmly-held (although seldom articulated) beliefs and assumptions about her world. Probably the most striking of these is a belief in the goodness
and beneficence of nature, a belief made clear by a scene early in *The Dollmaker*. In this scene, a self-confident and contented Gertie, surrounded by her children, serves a generous dinner of cornbread, hominy, shuck beans, sweet potatoes, cucumber pickles, milk, and green tomato ketchup "with pride, for everything, even the meal in the bread, was a product of her farming" (91). And although Gertie works the land to insure her family's survival, she loves and understands it as well; on more than one occasion, she refuses to cut healthy trees or branches when "crooked" or damaged one will suffice (55, 137).

Closely tied to Gertie's love for and reliance on the natural world is her desire to possess and work her own land, a desire she characteristically sees in Biblical terms: "[h]er foundation was not God but what God had promised Moses -- land" (127-8). For fifteen years Gertie has scraped together money to purchase a farm and thus free her family from the economic bondage of sharecropping; as the novel opens, she has saved $310 toward the purchase of the Tipton Place, a deserted homestead adjacent to her father's. Gertie carries her savings in the lining of an old coat, beneath a torn pocket, and she takes the bills out and counts them while waiting for her son to recover from diphtheria at a small town doctor's office:

Some were folded alone into tiny squares, others were folded two and three together, and many, like the four new [ones] were crumpled hastily into tiny balls. Each she unfolded and smoothed flat on the floor with the palm of her hand, looking at it an instant with first a search, then a remembering glance. Sometimes after a moment of puzzlement she whispered, "That was eggs at Samuel's two years ago last July," and to a five, "That was the walnut-kernel money winter before last," and to another one, "That was the big dominecker that wouldn't lay atall; she'd bring close to two dollars now." Of one so old and thin it seemed ready to fall apart at the creases, she was doubtful, and she held it to the light until she saw a pinhole through Lincoln's eye. "Molasses money." (41)

In this passage, Arnow makes clear that, to Gertie, every piece of currency she possesses represents the concrete reward for something as tangible as the land she wants to buy; or, to put it in a more sophisticated manner, Gertie's response to her savings reveals a pre-industrial conception of money, a conception far removed (then and now) from the prevalent wage-earner mentality. Money, as Gertie sees it, comes not from one's labor, but from the produce of one's labor, specifically of one's farming.

Taken together, these details suggest that Arnow goes to some lengths in *The Dollmaker* to create a mid-twentieth-century protagonist who embodies in a surprisingly pure form the Jeffersonian ideal of the small yeoman farmer working not for wages but for the produce of the land and deriving not only economic independence but also spiritual and moral compensation from his -- in this case her -- close relationship to the natural world. And while Gertie would not think of her love of the land, her desire to own a piece of it, and her conception of money as agrarian or pre-industrial, the opening chapters of *The Dollmaker* associate her assumptions and beliefs -- and, by implication, those of other hill farmers -- with precisely these modes of American thought.

This early association proves a key one for the reading of the novel's Detroit chapters because it suggests that the story of Gertie's displacement has ramifications beyond the personal, that the narrative of her dislocation both dramatizes the individual's loss of a close relationship to nature and exposes the vulnerability of a traditional -- and largely American -- mode of thought. Most readers, however, overlook the fact that the Kentucky chapters also question the viability of Gertie's dream of a self-sustaining life on the land. Even in Kentucky, Gertie needs more cash than her farming can provide; she has no money to buy shoes or eyeglasses for five-year-old Cassie, and after fifteen years of harsh economizing (prior to her brother Henley's unexpected bequest), she has only about half the
amount necessary to purchase the Tipton Place. Despite Gertie's assumptions to the contrary, then, her rural world does not remain insulated from the demands of a modern dollar economy, and, although her farming may provide generous meals, it cannot provide for her family's physical needs. Ironically, it does not even provide the funds necessary for them to obtain their own land.

Arnow had already dramatized the need for what she sometimes called, in the vernacular of the hills, "cash money," since the male characters of both *Mountain Path* and *Hunter's Horn* turn to moonshining as a way to convert their corn crops to readily available cash. Arnow acknowledged, in fact, the ever-present need of money as the single most compelling reason for migration from the Kentucky mountains, commenting in the introduction to *Mountain Path* that the post-World War II depletion of the region's population occurred because "some means of earning cash . . . never came to the back hill community." Arnow goes a step further in *The Dollmaker*, however, and not only dramatizes the need for cash, but also portrays the striking alienation of a genuine farmer like Gertie Nevels from any means of earning it, other than by selling the surplus produce of her farming. Gertie and her way of life seem trapped, therefore, in an inescapable paradox. On the one hand, the agriculturally dependent mountaineer accepts a pure sense of agrarian economics and attempts to live entirely from the land; on the other hand, the modern world insists that its inhabitants -- whether they live in rural Kentucky or industrial Detroit -- earn money in some other, non-agricultural manner.

Most of the residents of Gertie's Kentucky had succumbed to the need for cash -- or to the demands of war -- prior to the opening of *The Dollmaker*; the older men had pursued the "big money" to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Gary, Indiana, Hampton Roads, Virginia, or some other incarnation of the war-time industrial city, while the war had scattered the younger men throughout Europe and the Pacific. The wonderfully realized scene at the Ballew, Kentucky, general store and post-office rendered in chapters six and seven of *The Dollmaker* can, in fact, almost stand alone as Arnow's comment on rural Kentucky after the beginning of World War II. In this scene, Arnow reveals that virtually all the male members of the community -- including several characters from *Hunter's Horn* -- have left the region. The compassionate and forgiving Samuel Hull has exchanged preaching for defense work, leaving the people with only the ministrations of the fiery, hell-evoking fundamentalist, Battle John Brand; Lester Tucker and Jaw Buster Miller (Anderson in *Hunter's Horn*) have taken their families and gone North; and eighteen-year-old Andy Hull is fighting in France. Of the remaining members of the community present in these chapters, moreover, only the elderly seem to share Gertie's strong commitment to the land and agriculture. These people, old men and women like John Ballew and Gertie's mother-in-law Aunt Kath, can no longer effectively farm their property, but they have no children willing to assume the difficult and often unremunerative task -- witness Clovis Nevels' preference for Detroit over the Cumberland and John Ballew's rather pathetic wish that Gertie could replace his own absent sons and daughters (112).

Viewed against this backdrop, Gertie appears as something of an anomaly even within the Kentucky hills. Her aspirations toward a life on the land seem strangely out of keeping with those of the younger people around her and with her particular historical period -- the period during which, Arnow consistently argues, the need for cash and the sudden availability of jobs outside the area drove increasing numbers of people away from their isolated Kentucky farms and from their traditional, agriculturally-based way of life.

Arnow's point about the demise of agriculture seems borne out late in the novel when Gertie can imagine no future for her run-away son, Reuben, except in the coal mines or a factory (564), but a sense of the movement away from farming also pervades *The Dollmaker's* opening chapters. In these chapters, ironically, the characters who treasure the old way of life most often give voice, albeit unconsciously, to its decline. When Gertie tells Reuben, for instance, that "[y]our great-great-granpa Kendrick owned all th land tween here an the ridge road clean down to th
river an up to th head a th creek -- nigh onto four thousand acres," the reader can hardly ignore the fact that Grandpa Kendrick's descendants own nothing (59). Nor can a reader easily ignore the implications of Aunt Kate's prophetic warning to Gertie: "if'n you follow [Clovis to Detroit] he might never come back" (125). For Arnow, people did not return to the farm after the "Great Migration."

A final intriguing detail from The Dollmaker's early chapters demonstrates Arnow's conception of the pervasiveness of change in the Kentucky mountains. As the remaining members of the community wait for letters from their absent relatives, Mrs. Hull reveals, almost in an aside, that Nunnely D. Ballew has left the area (124). The fox-hunting and subsistence-farming protagonist of Hunter's Horn, Nunn Ballew shares Gertie Nevels' love of the land and her commitment to life in the hills; at the end of Hunter's Horn, both his commitment to his Kentucky farm and his economic ability to sustain it seem, despite a severe personal crisis, stronger than at any other point in the novel. Unlike his neighbors -- and unlike Gertie, for that matter -- Nunn also seems relatively immune to any obvious pressure to migrate. At thirty-five in 1941, he would probably be ineligible for military service; a natural farmer with a strong aversion to machinery, he does not desire a high-paying job in the North -- late in Hunter's Horn, in fact, Nunn comments that he'd "rather be in th fighten than shut up in a factory" (518). There is, then, no clear motivation for Nunn Ballew to forsake the land and the way of life he loves; his disappearance from the Kentucky hills suggests that Arnow views the dream of a self-sustaining life on the land -- no matter how dedicated the dreamer -- as largely unattainable.

This reading should not suggest that Arnow undervalues or disparages the way of life espoused by Gertie Nevels and Nunn Ballews of her fiction, for she clearly prefers the values and traditions of the Kentucky mountains embodied in these characters to the chaos and materialism she sees as characteristic of the modern urban world. By the time she wrote The Dollmaker, however, Arnow saw the life of the self-sufficient Kentucky subsistence farmer as primarily a thing of the past; in her view, the need for cash had driven the people from the land and had made wage-oriented jobs outside the mountains increasingly attractive. Arnow does not, in other words, suggest that Gertie's dream of a life on the land can be workable so long as she stays in the rural world of Kentucky, nor does she set up a relatively simplistic dichotomy between an edenic, pastoral world and a hellish, industrial one-- both of which mistaken assumptions are implicit in many critical essays on The Dollmaker. Finally, Arnow does not indicate that Gertie could return to her previous way of life at some future point -- an assumption explicit in the ending of the popular Jane Fonda film based on the novel. Instead, Arnow present in The Dollmaker a complex, unsentimental, and astute vision of the demise of mountain life, and her perceptive treatment of the issue should not surprise us. She was, after all, a student of southeastern Kentucky's history, folklore, and sociology, as well as a writer of its fiction.

Notes

There are, however, some notable exceptions. Lee R. Edwards, for instance, recognizes the war's intrusion into Kentucky, and identifies the "naiveté of Gertie's wish to maintain herself, her family, and her community outside the war's axis, immune from the encroachments of a very different world. A futile dream, her vision is also self-deceptive" (222). According to Joan Griffin, "by the time of Gert's leaving [Kentucky], if not before it, hill culture as a system of life and the hill community have been virtually destroyed by the combination of war and technology" (112).

Arnow uses the term "cash money" in the introduction to Mountain Path. In that text, she also provides a very tolerant -- and interesting -- view of moonshining, one consistent with my analysis: "It was the only way for the farmer to change a raw product into a manufactured article and so make a little extra money with his work."

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