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Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire* and the Industrial South¹

SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S *BEYOND DESIRE* (1932) IS NOTABLE FOR ITS criticism of the materialist economy that plagued the workers in the industrial South of the 1930s. The novel denounces the exploitation of men, women, and even children, and calls attention to their struggle to survive in inhumane working conditions. Witnessing the inequities of the industrial South, Anderson protested its economic system and aligned himself with other novelists who in the 1930s sought in communism the solution to the plight of workers. Like Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936), to name just two, Anderson's *Beyond Desire* reveals the economic injustices in the life of common and poor people intertwined with the hope offered by communism.² In this framework, the author exposes a power structure that exploits class, gender, and race to attain inordinate economic benefits for a privileged few.³ But *Beyond Desire* deserves to be revisited both for its scathing criticism of Southern capitalism in the 1930s and for its reminder that today, nearly eight decades later, the persistent weaknesses of such an economic system still need to be exposed and resolved.

In the early thirties, the labor movement and the poor working conditions in the Southern mills provided Anderson with topics for his book-length essay titled *Perhaps Women* (1931) and his novel *Beyond Desire* (1932). As Charles E. Modlin suggests, "Anderson's interest in the emerging world of American industry had previously been reflected in the agrarian-industrial conflict in *Winesburg, Ohio*, *Poor White*, and

¹I would like to thank Dr. John W. Ward (West Chester University) and Dr. John Jebb (University of Delaware) for their generous comments and suggestions on this study.

²It is worth noting that *Beyond Desire* predates these two better-known works.

³The novel has not been well-regarded by critics. For example, Irving Howe sees it as structurally and stylistically weak (231), Kim Townsend stresses its poor reception and what she sees as its preoccupation with sex (279-80), and David Anderson points out its "formlessness, meandering, and irrelevancies" (*Introduction* 128).

many of his short stories, including 'The Egg' and 'Ohio Pagan.' [Then], however, his concern with industrialism became much more politically focused" (xv). In 1929, Anderson visited mills in Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee, where he observed the labor conditions of the workers. In "Elizabethton, Tennessee" (1929), Anderson wrote of "a recent flare up of labor trouble among the employees of the huge rayon plants there. . . . [A] woman who had long been engaged with an organization that works for the betterment of the [laborers] . . . told me . . . terrible things" about the working conditions in the mills (526). Meeting workers and observing both unfair management practices and a materialist economy not only inspired Anderson's writing but also turned his political focus to communism as a possible solution to the problem of workers' exploitation. In both *Perhaps Women* and *Beyond Desire*, Anderson denounces the capitalist exploitation of workers in the Southern mills. Industrial economy produced a stratified society that discriminated against the workers and the poor. In *Beyond Desire*, Anderson presents the communist ideology that developed in the Southern mills in defense of workers' rights and dialectical relations, i.e. the opposition of forces (institutions, employers, workers and social classes) that shaped the Southern industrial economy and society. In the novel these relations establish a socioeconomic structure in which the educated middle class exploits the uneducated worker while the bourgeoisie (management) disempowers the proletariat and discriminates according to gender, class, and race. *Beyond Desire* situates Anderson's interest in communism in the socio-economic climate of his time by dramatizing the dialectical relations that sustained Southern capitalist industries.

I

Anderson's political activism developed principally from 1931 to 1933. Concerned about the exploitation of labor and the unfair demands of capitalism, he turned his attention to the working and living conditions of the factory hands, their sufferings and struggles. These topics led him to explore communist ideology as a tool to resolve the social and economic imbalances of his time. Although his interest in communism was short-lived, he continued to support socio-political and economic equity and to reject exploitation. Therefore, Anderson can be fairly regarded as an advocate of workers' rights against American

capitalism. As David Anderson asserts, the author of *Beyond Desire* “was willing to be counted on the side of humanity, justice, and courage” (*Sherwood* 129).

As with many other liberals, Anderson’s sympathy for communism started as a consequence of the Depression. After a period of booming economy, the stock market collapsed in 1929, businesses closed, and unemployment soared. The failure of American society was not only economic but also moral: the period was characterized by the economic splendor of a wealthy few who achieved their riches on the backs of an impoverished population of exploited workers. According to James Schevill, “The one immediate issue was the obvious, terrible living conditions of the working class. Communism promised action to relieve this suffering. No other political doctrine seemed so dynamic” (275). Anderson’s advocacy of socioeconomic reform led him to oppose what he perceived as capitalist exploitation and to side with labor movements. In 1928, at the news of threatened strikes, he hurried to the Southern textile town of Elizabethton, Tennessee, where he observed an apparently thriving business community and “shiny new factories” that presidential candidate Herbert Hoover had praised in his visit to the city; Anderson “looked at Elizabethton with a jaundiced eye” (Whalen 13-14). He noticed the five-year-old already “half-decrepit worn-out” buildings (Anderson, “Elizabethton” 526) and factory-owned homes for workers, which reflected not only squalid living conditions but also other serious problems: urban crowding, low salaries, and an unhealthy working environment. These problems generated strikes in which the Elizabethton factory workers were intimidated by the National Guard, evicted “from their company-owned houses [by management], [who also] starve[d] them out, [and] shatter[ed] the union, [so that] the strikes [finally] collapse[d]” (Whalen 18). Appalled by this socioeconomic climate, a politically-minded Anderson wrote a letter to Charles Brockler⁴ expressing his disillusion with the middle class: “There is something about prosperity, the hunger for it, the pretense in all these middle-class Americans, that makes the soul sick.” Consequently, Anderson turned for inspiration to the exploited and marginal. He

⁴A bank clerk and painter in New York whom Anderson met in 1928. Information about Brockler and Anderson’s acquaintance is presented in the footnote of Letter # 154. In Letter # 155, Anderson writes about Brockler’s artistic talent and potential success as a painter if he could generate financial assistance (*Letters* 184-87).

remarked in the same letter: "I presume that is why I keep going back to the workers, poor people with little pretense to them" (*Letters* 223).

It is not surprising that in 1931 he traveled to Georgia to observe the economic configuration of Southern industrialism, its factories and mills, workers' demands, their subhuman working conditions, and the pressure exerted by capitalist employers. The nationally publicized Danville strike immersed Anderson in the core of the labor movement, namely, in the objectives of the Communist Party, particularly in its desire to organize labor to claim workers' rights. As the Depression worsened, so did unemployment, and communism expanded its demands for "the seven hour, five day week, [no] speed up, . . . social insurance, [no] wage reduction" (Sapoos 916). In Danville, Virginia, Anderson witnessed extreme tension between labor and management. Not only was labor denied better working conditions, but workers also faced reprisals: many employees lost their jobs for participating in the union (Sapoos 921). On January 13, 1931, Anderson addressed the hungry and exploited Danville mill workers (called uncooperative "radicals" and "anarchists" by their detractors) in a passionate speech and encouraged them to continue the fight for their good and that of civilization (Schevill 273). Although the Danville strikers tried to avoid violence, they clashed with the authorities and government troops. Finally, their very survival in danger, the workers returned to their jobs. Communist leaders, facing arrest and persecution, continued to organize Southern workers (Sapoos 921-22).

Although Anderson criticized industry in *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Poor White* for destroying "the agricultural way of life" (Schevill 276), he admired machines, whose energetic rhythms and musical sounds inspired him. Personifying the machines, he wrote, "I think the machinery of the mill sings and roars and rattles. . . . [Y]ou feel the belts flying and the looms dancing" (*Letters* 219). In the factories, he discovered "the complex beauty of . . . machines" (*Letters* 218), a beauty which ironically oppressed the workers in whose defense he would turn to communism.

In 1930, while still waiting for his divorce from Elizabeth, his third wife, Anderson struck up a friendship with Eleanor Copenhaver, Industrial Secretary of the YWCA in New York, a lively and intelligent woman, educated at the University of Richmond and Bryn Mawr, whom he married in 1933. Eleanor indisputably sharpened his awareness of the injustices in the industrial South. During their courtship, they travelled

together throughout the region, Eleanor to meet the requirements of her job and Anderson to seek material for his writing. Together they visited factories, attended union meetings, and witnessed the economic gulf between factory workers and management. These visits furthered Anderson's understanding of the workers' ordeal. Moreover, Eleanor's commitment to improving women's working and housing conditions helped Anderson develop a stronger insight into the plight of factory women (Modlin xv). He wrote in a letter to Nelson Antrim Crawford, editor of *Household Magazine*, "any modern culture that has life in it must take the machine into account, and women respond to the machine much better than men do. They are less afraid of it. . . . It would be very, very interesting if we had come into a time when the dominant fact in life is the inadequacy of men and the strength of women" (*Letters* 216). These women reminded him of his mother, who had died from pneumonia, after a "long struggle to keep [their] house all together. . . . [in] a bitterly cold winter during which she continued to toil as a washerwoman, running constantly in and out of the house [in] her [wet] clothes" (Anderson, *Memoirs* 75). Anderson wrote to his brother Karl: "I always see mother in these factory women and want to fight for them" (Schevill 270). If his mother, Emma Anderson, had inspired him artistically and had awakened in him the capacity to dream and "see beneath the surface of lives" as claimed in his dedication to her of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Eleanor Copenhaver furnished him the opportunity to learn about factory workers' exploitation, and thereby strengthened his political activism. Undoubtedly, his love of and admiration for both women heightened his sensitivity to the plight of female factory hands, whom he assigned major roles in *Beyond Desire* and *Perhaps Women*.

As Anderson's faith in the capitalist foundation of US democracy decreased, his attraction to communism increased. Disillusioned by an America driven by materialistic goals, he wrote to Eleanor:

I think there must inevitably be a long terrible war in the world between those who have and won't give up and those who have not and can't get. . . . I have come to believe now in the failure of democracy, founded as ours is on capitalism. . . . Democracy . . . is forgotten in America . . . under democracy, capitalism has grown constantly stronger rather than weaker. (*Secret* 76)

Despite his popularity as an advocate of workers, a debater on industrialism, and a speaker on economic inequities, Anderson felt torn

between communist ideology and his writing. His political activism reached its climax in 1932. Although he never joined the Communist Party, he supported its endeavors. On June 9, 1932, he wrote to Eleanor: “Agreed, with Robert Dunn [who had asked Anderson to head the Prisoners’ Relief Fund, under the auspices of the International Labor Defense], to give my name to the communist organization for the relief of political prisoners . . . to be shirt front for the real workers” (*Secret* 165). In the same year, Anderson attended the World Congress Against War in Amsterdam.⁵ Its delegates, who represented twenty-seven nations, supported left-wing ideologies, sought world peace, and condemned imperialism and fascism. Inspired by the passionate speeches of the workers and their plans to “strike in munition plants, to refuse to transport arms, to fire guns,” Anderson returned to the US (*Secret* 217). At this time, although his sympathy still lay with the workers and the marginalized, his artistic nature resurfaced, as this letter to Eleanor suggests:⁶ “I have been reading [D.H.] Lawrence and that awakens in me . . . the individual that is Sherwood Anderson, aside from everything. . . . The poet lives in me” (*Secret* 221). Anderson’s attraction to communism began to weaken in 1934, with the advent of the New Deal and its promise of improved economic conditions though his interest in the less privileged continued. (Carlson 141-42). He embraced his artistic career and sought to satisfy his reemerging poetic nature.

II

Although Anderson’s involvement with labor movements, industrialization, and communism may have temporarily slowed his creative writing, it profoundly influenced his artistic goals. In 1930, he wrote to his publisher, Horace Liveright: “I’ve got an interest, though, and I’m going to go to it. . . . It is working people in the [Southern] mills” (*Letters* 203). The cruel working conditions of the textile mills, generated by Southern industrial capitalism, led Anderson to write his proletarian novel *Beyond Desire*, which deals “with the textile strike led

⁵For further details on this topic see also Schevill and Carlson.

⁶In 1932, Anderson started writing one letter daily to Eleanor Copenhaver, who would find the letters at his death. He wrote a total of 330 letters collected in *Sherwood Anderson’s Secret Love Letters: For Eleanor, a Letter a Day*. Many of these letters denounce capitalism and thus throw light on their author’s political sentiments.

three years before in Gastonia, North Carolina, by Communist organizers, a strike in which bitter violence flared repeatedly between the strikers on one side and the police and vigilante groups on the other” (Rideout viii).

Critic David Anderson affirms that although *Beyond Desire* is not a “proletarian novel in either a descriptive or an ideological sense,” it deals with people trapped in circumstances that shaped their society. Although the control of these circumstances lies beyond the characters’ comprehension, they intend to protect themselves. To do so, they fight to manage the social and economic forces that oppress them (“Sherwood Anderson’s Midwest” 107). John E. Bassett also suggests that *Beyond Desire* is “neither a proletarian nor an ideological novel [since] neither Red Oliver nor the author ever commits himself to communism or to the labor cause.” In addition, Bassett points out, Anderson’s “political argument for communism or labor” is weakly presented, especially if compared to Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* (111). Granted, *Beyond Desire* can be read as a social novel for its emphasis on the social and economic conditions that molded the characters’ lives, and the reforms that it calls for. However, like Rideout, I would argue that *Beyond Desire* can also be read as a proletarian novel: viewed in a Marxist critical framework, it highlights workers’ oppression under capitalism and shows Anderson’s desire to awaken readers to the need for political and economic change. As a proletarian novel, *Beyond Desire* presents a Marxist platform, denounces capitalist economy, and scathingly criticizes class relations and stratification.

Within the Marxist context, *Beyond Desire* needs to be studied according to the dialectical relations between employer and worker, bourgeois and proletariat, social classes and racial conflicts, dualities that reveal the injustices of the Southern industrial economy of the time. This materialistic approach to the text reveals class exploitation, supremacy and subjugation in the cultural framework of the novel. As Robert Dunne asserts: “*Beyond Desire* . . . await[s] interpretations from . . . [a] neo-Marxist . . . perspectiv[e] [since it] depicts Anderson’s continued interest in the wide-ranging effects of industrialism, in this case, as they play out among the working class in Southern mill towns” (112).

In fact, *Beyond Desire* may be understood as a literary representation of the data Anderson obtained at the Southern mills, and his exploration

of and uncertainties about communism. The novel reflects the struggle that Anderson observed between the bourgeoisie, in their defense of capitalist materialism, and the exploited proletariat at the mills, a struggle that leads to a revolution against bourgeois authority (Althusser 16-17). Anderson had observed this revolutionary process at the mill strike in Danville, Virginia, where he gave a strong speech encouraging the strike (Schevill 272-73). In the novel, this process involves Red Oliver, who is attracted to communism as a possible solution to workers' exploitation but uncertain about its efficacy as a political ideology. Workers, breaking with a capitalist economy, fought, according to Antonio Gramsci, against "contradictions inherent in the social system characterized by the régime of capitalist property" (*Selections* 143). Anderson's novel also reveals how the dominant ideology of the 1930s in the Southern industrial economy legitimized the power of the bourgeoisie and allowed the exploitation of the proletariat. Through the narrator and Red, Anderson both proposes a Marxist solution to the social injustices caused by capitalism and dramatizes his concerns about communism. An omniscient narrator says that Red was trying to "get his own mind straight as to what he felt about the growing labor difficulties in the South and all over America" (267). Later Red wonders if communism "might be the great curative philosophy" (272). Like Anderson, Red has only a theoretical knowledge of this political ideology. Anderson had read a translated version of Trotsky's *The History of the Russian Revolution* and was familiar with Marxist doctrine, and Red had read communist and anarchist books at college while assimilating the message of a Marxist professor who encouraged his students to redress the economic evils of society. However, such communist tenets as state ownership appear to trouble Red and his friend Neil (also attracted to Marxism). When Red asks whether Neil would "give up ownership" of his productive farm, a hesitant Neil, who like Red has abstract notions about communism, responds, "they might have to take it from me" (7). Like Anderson's, Red's theoretical knowledge of Marxism does not convince him that this ideology will solve labor problems. Therefore, while Anderson wants to visit Russia to see the results of the implementation of communism, Red joins the strikers of the Birchfield cotton mill to gain further understanding of the workers' problems and of the promise of communism. David Anderson explains that Red was fearful of the "brutality on the Communist's side."

However, he considered that “there was nothing else” to help workers (*Introduction* 127).

In *Beyond Desire*, the dialectical relations between members of the Southern middle class and mill workers are mainly founded on the dichotomy between education and ignorance which empowers the former while subduing the latter, a division reminiscent of the plantation system. In the industrial South, education is available to the upper middle class, whose numbers increased in the 1920s with the reduction of farm earnings and the expansion of industrial revenue. Being educated and belonging to the middle class, both Neil and Red have opportunities to advance in their cultural milieu while the mill workers do not. Neil, whose father “lived well” and “had managed to send Neil East to college” (6), will inherit his father’s prosperous farm. While searching for his identity and enjoying his sexual awakening with a revolutionist woman, Neil lives comfortably free of financial problems, in a position of power afforded by his money and education. Red, whose father and grandfather had been physicians, studied at a Northern college.⁷ Following his family’s professional trajectory, he could have aspired to a comfortable life. However, he opts to work at the mill and to side with the mill workers. Like Red, Ethel Long belongs to a professional family. Daughter of Judge Long, Ethel, a modern Southern woman, attends the University of Chicago and later becomes the librarian of Langdon Public Library, a genteel position “fixed up for her” by Blanche, her manipulative stepmother (another example of the power of the middle class) (128-29). Neil, Red, and Ethel represent a new generation of middle class Southerners for whom the old South with its plantation economy and its “spotless white Southern womanhood” (105) has become moribund. Instead Red and Neil envision a Southern economy with egalitarian worker-management relations, and Ethel envisions liberated female behavior.

In contrast, education was inaccessible to mill workers, a disadvantage that kept them from personal and political power. Doris, for example, a strong and bright worker, a paragon of efficiency on the production line, is illiterate. Long and hard working hours and, consequently, extreme fatigue deplete workers’ energy and destroy their

⁷A study of father-son/daughter relations in *Beyond Desire* could reveal how the changing social and economic forces of the South affected them. For a study of these interactions in *Winesburg, Ohio*, see Conner.

access to education. Doris returns home from her exhausting hours at the mill to take care of her baby, her husband, Ed, and her ill mother-in-law, both incapacitated because of the unhealthy working conditions at the mill. While the narrator repeatedly refers to the thriving industrial mills, he does not mention schools for the mill workers. The public library in Langdon functions mostly as the setting for a sexual encounter between Ethel and Red, and for the development of Red's ideas about communism, not as an educational venue for the mill workers and townspeople. Ed, an avid reader who had studied to become a preacher, thinks about organizing a union (78). Ironically, although he is better educated than the mill workers, he lacks leadership skills. Laughing at himself, he laments: "I got ideas but no nerve" (78).

The narrative shows further the mill workers' deficient education when, viewing Langdon from the ferris wheel, Doris sees the court house, office buildings, the Presbyterian church, and the smoke-stack of the mill, but she "couldn't see the mill village" (93). Symbolically, this scene shows the forces controlling the industrial capitalist economy that dominates Langdon's culture. Significantly, Doris does not see a school, a foundational institution of a democratic society. Its absence effectively points out the workers' enforced ignorance, which promotes their subservience while increasing managerial power. To change the dichotomies between the middle class and the workers—the powerful and the weak—in the economic context, workers need to educate their "class instinct [that] is subjective and spontaneous," so it will become "class position," an "objective and rational" understanding of the dialectical employer-worker relationship (Althusser 13). In the same vein, Althusser asserts that workers' education needs to be "determined by proletarian class struggle conducted on the basis of the principles of Marxist-Leninist *theory*," not by the bourgeoisie (13).

Can the communist sympathizers, Neil and Red, and the communist leaders organizing the mill workers at Birchfield educate them to modify the dialectical relations? There is no poetic justice in *Beyond Desire*, no change in the socioeconomic structure. Despite the Langdon and Birchfield strikes, workers' rights remain unacknowledged, and the communist notions taught to them fail to improve their situations. Neil and Red have a superficial knowledge of communism but neither real commitment to it nor practical experience to implement it. Although Neil approves of communist ideology, his political allegiance to it does

not go beyond intellectual interest, intensified by his passionate relationship with the revolutionist woman. His primary functions in the novel are to emphasize through his own sexual awakening that of Red (whose sexual inexperience is repeatedly highlighted)⁸ and to foreground both his and Red's attraction to communism through their conversations. Besides his theoretical knowledge of communism, Red witnesses workers' exploitation and suffering at Langdon's cotton mill. However, his political commitment is undercut by his uncertainties about the doctrine, his desire for sexual experience, and his need to prove his manhood by overcoming the fears that had made him leave Langdon after the strike instead of facing charges for defending the mill workers.⁹ The communist leaders preparing the Birchfield mill workers for the strike have some organizational skill (e.g., they obtain land to set up the communist camp, manage to get provisions from local farmers, and gather enough workers to face the state troops), but they fail to clarify the lexicon of Marxist ideology, leaving uneducated workers to fight and in some instances die for political goals they do not understand. For example, the "singing woman" dies at the hands of the police for mouthing songs of protest taught by the communist leaders without communicating their revolutionary theme (272-74).¹⁰ And although Molly Seabright had participated in the strikers' camp, she understood neither the vocabulary nor the doctrines of the communist leaders who presided over the camp's indoctrination sessions (300).¹¹

⁸White explores the topic of sexuality in *Beyond Desire*. He argues that "The major character . . . demonstrates Anderson's return to the basic noble hero of *Marching Men*, but a hero flawed and humanized by his sexuality as in *Poor White* and *Many Marriages*" (36). For further discussion of this topic see pp. 36-38. See also David Kramer's study on the changing standards of masculinity and femininity in the Southern mill towns which led to modification of sexual norms.

⁹The irony of Red's name resides in his superficial commitment to communist doctrine, coupled with his ultimate unwillingness to pursue it to its logical conclusions.

¹⁰Neil, Red, and the communist organizers lack the education and organizational skills that would qualify them as members of Gramsci's category of "intellectuals," who are fitted by their education to organize and lead others to transform "the existing social order" (*The Gramsci Reader* 300-01).

¹¹Wixon's essay explores Anderson's efforts and those of such Midwestern radical writers as Joseph Kalar and Jack Conroy to find a "proletarian" aesthetic form that would "give voice" to the working class (34-35).

Beyond Desire presents a stratified society with dialectical relations founded on inequities seriously exacerbated by the capitalist Southern economy. In these inequities, the dichotomies bourgeois/proletariat, rich/poor, white/black stand out in the text. Tom Shaw, the wealthy owner of the Langdon cotton mill, represents exploitative management. A Satanic figure at the religious level and a self-centered, greedy individual dominated by the dark side of his Freudian id at the psychological level, he violates moral standards to satisfy his selfish desire to make money. He exploits his workers, men as well as women and children (36, 94), making them labor long hours in intolerable conditions (46, 69-70, 76, 77), and cuts their wages to suit the economic flow of supply and demand. In his role of actor-narrator, Tom Riddle, another bourgeois, remarks of Tom Shaw: "Hello, there goes the Prince of Langdon," a sarcastic and cynical comment that further emphasizes Tom Shaw's corrupt business dealings and hypocrisy (he attends a Langdon church, along with low-income people, in his luxurious car driven by his black chauffeur). Immediately after this comment, the intrusive narrator confirms Tom Riddle's judgment by expanding on his words: "In the new South Tom Shaw was the sort of man who had become the prince, the leader" (199). By calling him "the prince," the narrator implies a comparison between self-serving Tom Shaw and the title character of Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Just as Machiavelli's prince overlooks ethics to maintain his state and power, Tom Shaw ensures the success of his business by exploiting workers and manipulating others, such as the revivalist minister he bribes to preach about the benefits of industrialization in Langdon (33). Tom Shaw, who "got rich on the labor of the poor" (117), makes a point of attending church "telling himself that he was going there to worship the poor and lowly Christ" (118). In industrial Langdon, Tom Shaw becomes one of "the new gods of the American scene" (117) and material goals override moral and religious values.

In Anderson's industrial South, the bourgeois (management) prospers while the proletariat's psychological and physical lives deteriorate. The fact that Doris could not see the mill village from the ferris wheel but could see the smoke stack symbolically highlights bourgeois and managerial power that ignores workers' basic needs. Submerged in the frenzied process of production, workers' self-identity is badly damaged, as indicated by the narrator's reluctance to identify some characters by

name. For example, the singing woman killed by the police is simply "The woman, the song-making woman, an ex-farm woman from the hills" (269). And Molly Seabright, one of the principal characters of Book Four, is not identified by name until Part Two. Previously the narrator refers to her as "the woman" or the "working woman" (246-47). Workers also lose their self-confidence and pride as a consequence of the personally unrewarding tasks they perform and the subservience needed to keep their jobs. In this vein, Doris thinks that not even "a cowboy" would be fool enough to fight for a mill girl (83). Moreover, the workers' psychological deterioration is paralleled by their physical debility. Ma Hoffman (Doris's mother-in-law) has tuberculosis (76), Grace's extreme fatigue prevents her from doing dishes at night (96), and "Most of the mill girls had bad teeth" (83).

Dialectical relations which fragment the Southern social structure are presented not only through the bourgeois/proletariat dichotomy but also through gender, class, and racial divisions. While Doris's view of the smoke-stack from the ferris wheel highlights production as the centerpiece of Langdon's capitalist economy, it also clarifies the position of women in the Southern industrial mills. Mill women, cogs in the economic system, stand out as effective workers and/or sex objects. For example, Doris's efficiency is repeatedly foregrounded: she "could always do more than her share," was "a smart fast workwoman," and was not a time waster (69). The smoke-stack becomes a phallic symbol that, towering over the village, reveals a patriarchal economic system that reinforces male sexual power. Just as in the plantation economy Southern white men had exploited black women (105), in the modern industrial mill foremen take advantage of female workers. For instance, Molly grows uneasy when the "young foreman. . . kept walking near her. . . Sometimes . . . touch[ing] her body with his body" (296). The mills' patriarchal economy disempowers women by making them instruments of the production line and objects of the sexual desires of their supervisors.

Dialectical relations that show class as well as racial discrimination (powerful/weak, white/black) are also reflected in the settings of the narrative. In addition to the highly significant ferris wheel scene, the narrator presents two other geographical areas that reinforce the novel's presentation of a power structure which empowers the educated and influential while subordinating the uneducated, the poor, and the black.

The second such area includes the mill village divided into the “best street” and the not-so-good streets. This division reveals class fragmentation among the mill workers, caused by the existence of a labor hierarchy. Ranking above the common laborer are the day superintendent, the foremen, and the welfare worker, who can afford houses “on the best street” of the mill village. The omniscient narrator emphasizes the existence of such a hierarchy as he presents the locations of the workers’ homes in the mill village.

There was a man called, “a welfare worker,” employed by the Langdon mills. He had a house on the best street of houses in the village, the street in which the day superintendent and some of the other higher-ups lived. Some of the foremen lived over there. The foreman of the spinning-room did. (88)

By including the welfare worker, whose character remains largely undeveloped, among the residents of “the best street,” the narrator hints at his presence as a token effort on the part of management to give the impression that they are concerned with the working and living conditions of the mill hands and their families. However, in devoting attention to the welfare worker’s wife, the librarian of the village branch library, where Ed, Doris’s husband, borrows books, the narrator points out once more the social fragmentation in Langdon, this time, the divide between the people of the town and those of the mill village. By recording the branch librarian’s thoughts about Ed (89), the narrator contrasts the main library of the town with that of the mill village. Bourgeois Ethel manages the main library; the welfare worker’s wife directs the less important branch library. While Red, who belongs to a professional middle class family, goes to the main library to read and borrow books, Ed frequents the village branch. The setting of the mill village serves two purposes. First, it highlights the existence of a hierarchical structure at the employee level of the mill, a structure that empowers foremen, among other mill employees, and augments workers’ exploitation. Common workers are thus subdued by management as well as by foremen and supervisors, on whom management has bestowed a measure of power. Second, the setting of the mill village emphasizes another social fragmentation: the division between the townspeople and

the mill workers, a division that is further developed in the scene of the fair.¹²

The third geographical area presents the fair, which reveals social and racial divisions in Langdon, divisions the narrator criticizes harshly. To present these fragmentations, the narrator relies on the dichotomies townspeople/mill village people, middle/low classes, and white/black. Mill workers and blacks attend the fair on Saturday, their day off from work. However, "town people from Langdon," higher in the social scale, attend the fair "earlier in the week" or not at all, a social discrepancy the narrator presents through Doris's thoughts: "Doris didn't think she saw any that looked like [town people]. If they had been there, they had come earlier in the week" (87). In addition, the narrator criticizes Langdon's socioeconomic imbalance by focusing on those with low incomes: "It was a day for mill hands and for a lot of poor farmers with mules and their families" (87). Using short, emphatic sentences, the narrator strengthens his criticism of racial discrimination while indicating that blacks had the lowest status on the social scale: "It was niggers' day. . . . The niggers kept pretty much off to themselves. . . . There were separate stands for them to eat at" (87). Mark Whalan points out that *Beyond Desire* reveals the author's "awareness of [the deplorable] labor conditions in the industrial South" and adds that "these conditions were differentiated according to race. . . . African Americans were often given the worst and most dangerous jobs in the textile industry" (85), working conditions and racial discrimination that Anderson harshly criticizes in the novel.

Besides shaping a stratified society, dialectical relations based on the dichotomies controller/controlled, materialism/desire also manipulate emotional relations. In this vein, Ethel reflects the values of the Southern capitalist system by supporting materialism at the expense of love and by deviously controlling others to satisfy her personal needs. Materialistic goals control Ethel's life. Calculating, self-centered, unscrupulous, she is on a par with Tom Shaw as a representative of the capitalist South. If he makes his fortune by exploiting the mill workers, Ethel manipulates others to meet her egotistic wants. For instance, she

¹²Rideout shows the division between the town people and those of the mill village. For example, he points out that Red chooses to play on the mill baseball team instead of the town team and that, in the Langdon strike, he sides with the mill workers rather than with the town people (x).

marries Tom Riddle for his money and, earlier, as a student at the University of Chicago, she uses an “eager intense young” instructor, Harold Grey, who was courting her, to obtain the answers for her exams (153). In Langdon, she rejects her opportunity to love and be loved, an opportunity she desires, by choosing to marry the rich and cunning lawyer Tom Riddle instead of the young and financially unstable Red. Ethel wonders whether she will ever experience love (202). Her desire to “surrender” to a “nice” relationship fades after she satisfies her intense sexual craving with Red (107). Scheming and manipulative Ethel coldly dismisses a hurt and confused Red to marry a wealthy Tom Riddle. The sexual relationship between Ethel and Red reflects the dialectical relationships of industrial economy. The dichotomies strong Ethel/weak Red, controller/controlled replicate the capitalist power structure portrayed in the novel, for manipulation is at the service of egotistic and materialistic goals to the detriment of the weaker. Ironically, the relations powerful/weak, master/slave that have empowered Ethel are reversed in her marriage to Tom Riddle. The previously dominant Ethel becomes a decorative object in Tom’s life, since he merely “wanted a woman who would decorate his life. He wanted Ethel as he might have wanted a fine horse” (198). In their marriage, her energetic sexuality remains unsatisfied, for Tom does not approach her sexually and is indifferent to her emotional needs. They sleep in separate rooms (359) and her fear of “dry[ing] up” (107) turns out to be justified. Her expensive convertible, symbol of the materialism for which she had surrendered the fulfillment of her emotions, becomes the symbol of her emotional demise. At the devastating news of Red’s death, she drives the car at suicidal speed, thus releasing her pent up emotional frustration. Ultimately she returns to her loveless existence with her indifferent husband. As the defeated strikers go back to the mill to be subjected to further exploitation, Ethel returns to the emotional vacuum of Tom Riddle’s house: her husband’s indifference is reflected in the fact that “On that night he did not speak to her of her drive and afterwards he did not ask her where she had been” (359). The mill hands’ aspirations for better working conditions and Ethel’s craving for emotional satisfaction remain unrealized, for materialism overpowers both feelings and managerial ethics. *Beyond Desire*, the title of Anderson’s novel, clearly points to the difficulty of achieving love and justice in the Southern capitalist economy of the 1930s.

While the chapter on Ethel illuminates the effects of materialism on emotional relations, the final chapter of the novel, "Book 4: Beyond Desire," refocuses on the relations between the Marxist workers and a powerful superstructure formed by the police, the state government, and the army. Such dialectical relations forcefully replay the sociopolitical concern of the text. However, the communist message weakens as the action of the novel develops, since Red's concerns about his manhood and sexuality overpower his political ideology.

In this chapter, Red's emotional confusion, burgeoning sexuality and need to test his manhood dominate the narrative at the expense of the political theme. Through flashbacks and dreams connecting Red's past and present, the omniscient narrator highlights his emotional confusion and his search for selfhood. In Book 3, Red had experienced his emerging sexuality with Ethel; in Book 4, Molly also stirs him sexually and thus becomes the catalyst to his manhood (246), for Red reflects on the possibility that the love of a woman like Molly may enable him to realize his full masculine potential (305). By revealing his insecurity, this introspection simultaneously enhances his humanity and undermines his credibility as a communist hero. At this point, Red doubts his capacity to support Marxism and defend workers' rights, thus weakening the novel's political thrust. Red's emotional confusion and uncertain self manifest themselves through his uneasy sleep, in dreams which confuse Ethel and Molly, in the dreamlike quality of his daily life (247), and in his questioning of his destiny (246, 255). Anderson uses surrealistic techniques to describe Red's sleep, free associations and unreal events that reveal Red's unrest with his self:

a land filled with grotesque shapes—and he was in that land. Things change swiftly and strangely there. . . . Trees in that land become enlarged. . . . shapeless and elongated. . . . Desires come into the body of the sleeper.

Now you are yourself, but you are not yourself. You are outside yourself. (245)

Red's increasing emotional confusion and uncertainty about his manhood undermine the reader's confidence in his ability to handle his political dilemma (he wonders if communism is the solution). Moreover, his unsure behavior, wavering between supporting the strikers and leaving the camp, contributes to the reader's doubts about Red's reaction to the imminent clash between the strikers and the soldiers.

In addition, Red's persistent reservations about the effectiveness of communism complicate the political message of the text. To present such doubts, the narrator functions on two levels. First, he quotes Red's uncertain political thoughts: "This communism—is that the answer?" (315), a rhetorical question that reveals both his failure to assimilate the precepts of communism and his perhaps legitimate doubts about the viability of its ideology. Then, the narrator further reveals Red's unsure commitment to Marxism by equating the poverty and suffering of the striking workers' camp with the hopelessness and misery of the religious camp in Georgia. Both camps function as symbols of imperfect efforts to find solutions to the problem of human exploitation (252). Thus interpreted, the Birchfield camp becomes a metaphor for the religious camp. For instance, the poor worker at the Birchfield camp crawling out of a board shack (251) reminds Red of the religious camp, crowded with poor white people (251). Both religious enthusiasts and striking mill workers shelter in fragile "little tents and shacks," both are "ignorant and illiterate" as well as "physically and emotionally starved" (251-52), descriptions that make these camps illustrative of human misery and hopelessness. While at the religious camp, faith had become the panacea of the poor white, at the Birchfield camp, communism seemed to offer a hypothetical solution to the plight of the exploited workers. And if at the religious camp "the poor, the humble, the ignorant" (254) found hope in pointless hysterical trances (253), at the Birchfield camp, strikers put their faith in communist leaders who lacked the skills to organize an effective social revolution: these leaders just "Talk. Talk" (270). The two camps also embody the dialectical forces that empower middle-class materialism and wreak havoc in the lives of the dispossessed. To this end, the narrator shows the disdain of Red's father for the religious enthusiasts and the unfairness of the exploitative mill owners towards the workers. By pointedly showing debilitating suffering at both camps (not human satisfaction), the narrator reveals Red's weakening confidence in Marxism.

In addition to refocusing on a less confident Red, the narrator criticizes the cruelty and unfairness of the superstructure as represented by journalism, the middle class, and representatives of the law (three

supposed pillars of democracy). Such criticism reveals the incompatibility of democracy and Southern capitalism.¹³

First, newspapers were uninformative about the nature of communism and deceived their readers about the motives of the striking workers. For example, afraid of being fired, journalists had to sign off on the deceitful articles written by the mill company's legal counsel. One embittered newspaper man complained: "The lawyer for the mill company writes the editorials for our paper and we slaves have to sign them" (339). Corrupt media, with their calculated lies, become an integral part of the fraudulent Southern superstructure which maintains its power at the expense of democratic values.

Second, while the exploited workers turn to communism to redress the violation of their rights, the middle class and the governing authority fear Marxist sympathizers and combat them cruelly and unlawfully. Strikes in Langdon, Elizabethton, and Marion, among other cities, imperil the socioeconomic hegemony of the middle class, arousing fear and uncertainty, feelings the narrator presents metaphorically when he remarks: "A shiver had run through the whole South" (258). Similarly, the arrogant traveling salesman panics when Red reveals that he is a communist (263-64). The salesman's uncontainable fright turns him into a caricature that Anderson uses to ridicule the egotistical middle class. In the final scenes of the novel, the narrator continues to show the proletariat as victims of the dialectical forces that control the Southern economy while criticizing and even mocking the middle class. To this end, the narrator pointedly focuses on two minor characters: the president of the company that owns the Birchfield mill and the "little man." The self-centered president prefers to close the mill rather than reach a reasonable agreement with the workers that would benefit both sides in the dispute. In a Machiavellian tone, the president says: "We can close the mill and keep it closed for five years. We've got other mills" (344). In addition, the narrator repeatedly focuses on the insensitive "little man," a stationer, representing the middle class's lack of understanding towards workers' rights. His odd, carnivalised behavior satirizes the antagonism and ignorance that infuse the dialectical tensions between the prosperous and the poor. Controlled by anger and hostility towards the mill workers (he was "a man filled with many little

¹³For information on how flawed systems of education and media can undermine democratic values, see McChesney.

obscure hatreds" [345]), unaware of democratic values, selfishly talking constantly about his hurting feet (not the needs of others), "dancing in the road beyond the soldiers" (354), clenching his fists and yelling "Shoot. Shoot. Shoot" the communists (354), the "little man" embodies the materialism and ignorance of the Southern middle class and becomes a foil to the well-intentioned Red, a defender of the proletariat.

Third, when focusing on the cruel and unlawful reaction of the representatives of the law (the police, the governor, and the army) towards the communist sympathizers, the narrator strongly criticizes the absence of constitutional protection for the mill workers. Unfairness, cowardice, and hypocrisy characterize the behavior of the authorities who should be defending the workers' rights. For example, the laws, unjustly enforced, become the enemy of the poor (262). The critical narrator emphatically observes: "The law in America was something that could be depended upon to be unfair to the poor" (261). Moreover, law officers stand out for both their ruthlessness and lack of judgment, shouting when pursuing Red: "There's a red-headed son-of-a-bitch of a communist loose somewhere around in this country. . . . He's a dangerous man" (266). Unprepared for their duties, the deputy sheriffs were "sworn in for the time being" (267). "Tough men" and "half drunk," they "bullied and threatened the strikers," beating men and women alike while ordering: "Smash the damn communists if they resist. Kill them" (267). Ironically, in the ostensibly democratic society of the industrial South, police function as a symbol of political repression. Controlled by ignorance and hatred, the deputy sheriffs and other law enforcers become violators of human rights, not supporters of individual liberties. Furthermore, the hypocritical governor of North Carolina, threatened by political pressure, ignores the strikers' civil rights. If at the county level, the police and deputy sheriffs embody unfair law enforcement, at the state level, the governor's cowardly behavior represents the unwillingness of government to provide constitutional protection. Although the governor considers himself liberal, his own private interests quickly override his frail democratic ideals. Fearing both personal financial damage (he was a mill owner) and loss of the superstructure's political support, he yields to the demands of the newspapers, the mayor, and constituents by sending the troops to hem in the strikers (318-19). By criticizing the deceitful media, selective law

enforcement, and repressive state government, the narrator subverts antidemocratic use of power and defends workers' constitutional rights.

By the end of the novel, communism, intermittently but tellingly emphasized in the narrative, fades into the background. Although Anderson's criticism of the power system remains strong and relentless, the defeat of the Birchfield strikers by the soldiers and Red's dying to prove his manhood (not to defend his Marxist ideology) dilute the communist message in the text. First, visual images depicting the strikers' fears of the advancing troops, not their courageous defiance, foreshadow the defeat of the workers' Marxist ideology. For instance, the communist leaders herded the strikers out of the camp to picket; however, strikers stopped huddled at the view of the marching soldiers who would violently drive them back to their camp (357). Like their Langdon counterparts, Birchfield's millworkers had no alternative to suffering exploitation at the mill. Moreover, if at Langdon Red had run from the police instead of holding his ground among the defeated workers, at Birchfield, overcoming his fears, he dared the soldiers to test his manhood, not his communist convictions: "The strike at Birchfield was to come to something definite now. This was the critical moment, [Red's] test" (348). Ironically, his death becomes a futile and non-heroic demonstration of potential masculinity: he dies unimpressively challenging the "bluff" of the fearful and inexperienced troop commander, Ned Sawyer, who was nervously struggling to prove his own manhood. Red's non-heroic death—he is shot by the insecure Ned who is in charge of "raw boys" (346)—not only deprives the text of drama but also becomes a harsh criticism of Southern military ineptitude. Finally, to complement the anticlimactic ending that further vitiates the novel's communist message, a sexually "immoral letter" about Neil and his school-teacher (357), not a letter about communist tenets, is found in Red's pocket. Sexual overtones predominate at the end of the novel, as graphic images portray Ethel's passionless life, images that advance the theme of emotional frustration while further overshadowing the Marxist concerns of the text.

Beyond Desire portrays a historical moment that widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the industrial South. As presented in the novel, transitioning from an agricultural to an industrial economy and introducing modern technology empowered a middle class made up of professionals, well-off landowners, and industrial managers

who shaped the socioeconomic lives of the less privileged. Naturally, class stratification ignited struggles to upset the power structure represented by the dichotomies educated/uneducated, employer/employee, bourgeois/proletariat, rich/poor, and white/black, dichotomies that devalued humanitarian and democratic concerns. When Red and the mill workers turn to communism in the hope of ending the workers' exploitation, the resulting strikes fail, and the revolutionary process that promised to ensure workers' rights crashes. Ironically, communism, the mill workers' only visible hope, ceases to be an option partly because of the strike leaders' inability to convert their intellectual commitment to social justice into action. And Red's uncertainties about the efficacy of communism, blended with his doubts about his manhood, undermine his political inclinations. Lacking appropriate leadership and stifled by the intervention of political and military authority, communism runs a short, ineffectual course in Southern history. *Beyond Desire* articulates the inequities of 1930s Southern society and workers' exploitation in a capitalist economy while effectively criticizing the materialistic middle class. Read as a proletarian text, Anderson's novel graphically depicts the dangers of a capitalist and materialist power structure and tenaciously draws attention to the need to ensure fair working environments and an egalitarian society, a goal that has been only partially achieved in the decades since the novel's publication.

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